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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

by

DOUGLAS GOLDRING

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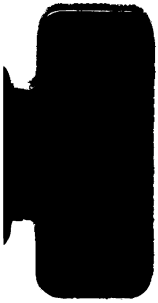

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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

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By the Same Author

THE FORTUNE
A Romance of Friendship

THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM
A Play in Four Acts

REPUTATIONS
Studies in Contemporary Literature

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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

By

DOUGLAS GOLDRING

New York

THOMAS SELTZER

1920

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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

Part I

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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

CHAPTER I

A PERSISTENT, jarring tremor ran through the framework of the White Star liner *Majestic* as her engines forced her across the grey-blue expanse of sea which now separated the great ship from the port of Cherbourg. It was almost as though the *Majestic* were herself excited by the prospect of reaching the gateway of France on this April morning, as excited as one, at least, of the passengers she carried.

Maggie Carter lay back in her chair, shading her eyes with her hand. She did this, not to protect them from the sun, but because she was afraid their shining would betray her secret. She did not wish anyone to guess what this moment meant to her. It was the climax of so many dreams in the back street of the great Canadian city where she had spent most of her life, that the occasion was one which called for the completest privacy. She wanted to enjoy it all by herself, and when she saw the quaint backs of Mr. and Mrs. Falkenheim in the distance—the unromantic good fairies who were making everything possible—she begged her stars that they would keep away. She wanted to be alone with her day-dreams, with the long, long thoughts of sweet-and-twenty, when she sees the cage-door suddenly ajar.

A nice American boy in the chair next to hers had first to be sharply dealt with before she had peace. His dark hair was plastered down, he wore a well-cut grey

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suit, a rather too noticeable shirt and tie, and patent-leather shoes over mauve silk socks. On his face was the smile which never, never comes off. Maggie had sat within its radiance all the way out from New York, and it made her want to scream. Its owner, young Harry K. Van Bergen, of Chicago, always looked overpoweringly cold-bathed and lively, even at eight o'clock in the morning, and Maggie, in spite of her Canadian upbringing, was oppressed by his efficiency. Seeing her shading her eyes with her hand, it was inevitable that he should leap for his field-glasses and adjust them for her. "We shall be in sight of the port under the hour, I reckon," he remarked in his bright, open way. "You can see the Cap de la Hague clearly with the glasses."

Maggie took them in order not to be uncivil, but she handed them back as quickly as she could and refused to be talkative. How could she be expected to talk, with all she had to think about? Such thoughts! At last she was to see Paris, she, Maggie Carter of Price Street! She was actually to spend three weeks there, and then to stay for the rest of the season in Bayswater. Bayswater, to her, sounded like the Fifth Avenue of Heaven. Her good fairies were so immoderately rich that it must surely be like that. She dreamt of interminable Bayswater triumphs, and all the fairy-stories and "smart novels" she had read in the parlour behind the paternal grocery store mingled to provide a setting for her future exploits. So fierce was the strength of the stored electricity inside her that she felt the walls of London must surely succumb to her attack, just as the walls of Jericho had fallen flat before the trumpets. Mr. and Mrs. Falkenheim, who held the keys of Bayswater, had succumbed on the second evening out from New York, and if she could conquer them, surely the whole world

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would soon be at her feet. She had first noticed them in the Bonaventure Station at Montreal, and being impressed by their luggage had contrived to settle herself in the same part of the train. It had been no difficult matter to get into conversation with Mrs. Falkenheim, and a question about New York, combined with an artless confession of ignorance and a general look of youth and inexperience, had been enough to excite the old woman's interest and to tap the stream of her good nature. All the way to New York she and her husband had laid themselves out to be pleasant to Maggie. She lunched and dined with them, and as the train hurried South along the shores of lovely Lake Champlain and by the side of the Hudson River they pointed out to her all the famous views. They were as eager for her to make the most of her opportunity as she was herself, and were enchanted by her freshness and beauty.

Maggie very soon discovered that they were sailing for Cherbourg in the *Majestic*, the liner on which, as luck would have it, she herself had booked her passage. As soon as she got on board ship she made it her business to see that the purser put her at the best table, next to her new friends. By the end of the second day out she had distinctly made progress, and that evening, after dinner, finding herself alone for a moment with Mr. Falkenheim, who was finishing a cigar, she had contrived to slip her little hand into his cold palm, while her eyes brimmed with tears. Then she had talked to him of her dead mother and of her girlhood "out West." She had never been "out West," but her dramatic instinct told her that it sounded better than a description of 618 Price Street, Montreal, and the vending of sugar, tea, and Cheddar cheese from a minor grocery store. That was an origin which Mr. Falkenheim would,

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of course, thoroughly understand; but Maggie had observed that for some reason the old man had acquired a romantic love for the open-air adventurous life of the prairies, for backwoods, and pioneers, and such like. Perhaps it was owing to the fact that one of his daughters, recently dead, had been married to a Canadian banker. It was in connection with her affairs that he and his wife had made the voyage out from England. He had been caught by the glamour of the new country. Its vigorous air seemed to blow away from his mind that odour of old clothes which all the perfumes of Araby, applied late in life, had not been able successfully to eradicate. And this wild Canadian creature, so typical—with her pale gold hair and china blue eyes, her fair skin and her vivid colouring—of the land of her birth, captivated him completely. The result of his admiration, since Israel Falkenheim was sixty-eight, was that he grew sentimental, in a dangerous, paternal way. His beady black eyes, however, never lost their observant shrewdness, and he was the first to tell himself "there's no fool like an old fool" when he felt her warm young fingers nestling in his hand.

Mrs. Falkenheim, bless her! was much more malleable than her husband, and, though equally shrewd, was too fat and lazy to be suspicious. After the death of her last surviving daughter (she had borne two) her heart had kept itself young by innumerable acts of generosity and kindliness. She had contracted a habit of declaring that all the orphans she met were like one or other of her lost dear ones—a statement not always well received by blonde and blue-eyed Anglo-Saxons. On learning that Maggie was motherless, she discerned in her a striking resemblance to the lost Leah.

Maggie would play around Mrs. Falkenheim as a lamb

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gambols around its mother, pick up her handkerchief, or run back to her cabin to fetch her smelling-salts (which enabled her to study at leisure the inside of a bathroom suite *de luxe* and to assure herself that the Falkenheims were really and truly rich). She quickly became as great a favourite with Mrs. Falkenheim as with Israel, and the handsome old woman was at pains tactfully to elicit Maggie's life history. Maggie, for a really voluble liar, had a surprisingly good memory for the essential points, and where one of her stories differed from another the differences, as a rule, could be explained as supplementary facts. The childhood in the far West was described with simple pathos, and being even more ignorant of prairies than Maggie, Mrs. Falkenheim never wondered how she had managed to acquire her sharpened and town-polished brain of the high-school girl, in those uncivilised wilds. Maggie, indeed, in spite of her Colonial drawl (rather pronounced at this stage in her career), was plainly a product of towns—to anyone who could observe. She referred to "a little bit of money" having been made and left to her "out West," to the death of her father, and to the voyage she was making to recover from her grief. She intended to stay with some English friends, but her plans were invitingly indefinite. Maggie's heart quailed as she thought of the miserable three thousand dollars of which her "little bit"—arising from the sale of the grocery store on her father's death—had consisted, and wondered whether what remained would really be enough to last her until she was floated. Her orphanhood and friendlessness were genuine, however, if her hinted fortune was not, and poor Mrs. Falkenheim had really no chance. The protecting wing ached to be allowed to protect, and it was with a carefully concealed gasp of relief that Maggie had submitted.

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Maggie frequently talked to Mrs. Falkenheim with wide-open and upturned blue eyes about her eagerness to see Paris. This eagerness was quite genuine. At Estelle's, the fashionable *couturière* where Maggie had been employed for two years before her father's death, the very name of the city was breathed with a kind of awe. All the rich ladies from Sherbrooke Street and the Mount Royal quarter wanted to be "Parisian." Maggie learnt that there might be advantages, after all, in belonging to the despised race of *habitants*. At least they could talk French. She made desperate efforts to learn the language of elegance. It seemed ridiculous to live in a city which was three-quarters French and not be able to speak a word of the language; and she was the only girl at Estelle's who could not talk it more easily than English. She had been employed first as a mannequin because of her lovely figure; but she had quickly proved her skill as a saleswoman, and had become popular with Madame's *clientèle*—so much so that Madame Valloton (the proprietor and manager of the business) had been bitterly disappointed when Maggie decided to leave. "I'm going to Paris, Madame," Maggie had said very decisively; and the old Frenchwoman, in spite of her chagrin at losing so useful and attractive an employee, had not been able to resist sympathy with this natural determination. She gave Maggie an introduction to a friend of hers, a Madame Aicard, who lived at Bois de Colombes, between Argenteuil and Asnières, just outside Paris. "She will soon find you something to do, Miss Carter, if you decide to stay in Paris." Madame Valloton smiled a sphinx-like smile at the blonde Scotch girl—a smile which, to Maggie, seemed vaguely sinister, malicious. But she put these thoughts aside, confident in her ability to look after herself and her virtue in the

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face of all the Madame Aicards in existence, and gladly accepted the letter of introduction. She would use it, if nothing better presented itself. So much for Paris; for England she could boast a more or less vague invitation from an old clerical admirer called Adam Henderson. He had married, was become a country vicar, and had started a preparatory school for boys in Dorsetshire. Apart from these two names, she was setting out on her expedition to conquer Europe with nothing but her good looks, her youth, and her six hundred pounds to recommend her. But she did not care. She was intoxicated with her ambitions, with the incandescent fire of her determination.

Madame Valloton's establishment had put a good deal of polish on the Price Street grocer's daughter, a fact of which Maggie herself was gratefully aware. By the time she left it she could speak a word or two of French with a tolerable accent, she knew a great deal about clothes, and had made as much use as possible of her opportunities of observing the deportment of the wealthy. The ladies whom she had taken as her models were perhaps not the safest examples to follow, but in relation to Price Street they formed an undoubted upward step. On the day that Maggie was ready to start on her great adventure she was quite able to pass muster, while she was quietly and simply but at the same time perfectly dressed. Her appearance was, in short, so very much "all right" that her drawl and her other Colonial peculiarities were put down by everyone whom she encountered on board ship as the hall-mark of immense riches. Even the Falkenheims—accustomed as they were to appraise social values to a nicety—were completely deceived. It was Maggie's earliest triumph.

Mrs. Falkenheim quickly elicited from Maggie the fact

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that she did not know *personally* the lady whom she proposed to visit in Paris, and was extremely perturbed by the discovery. "My dear," she said, "I don't at all like the idea of your going to stay with someone you have never even seen."

"I know it isn't very satisfactory," Maggie replied plaintively, "but it seemed to be that or nothing, and I didn't see why I should miss Paris just because I hadn't any relations or friends to go with!"

It was here that Mrs. Falkenheim's motherliness got the better of her. How could she resist offering to fill the place of the missing relatives? She could not.

"Now I have a splendid suggestion to make. As the lady you propose to visit is, you say, a total stranger to you, and you don't even know yet whether she can take you in, it surely can't matter at all if you don't go to her. Why don't you come with Mr. Falkenheim and me to the 'Capitol?' We are staying there for three weeks or so, and we should be delighted to have you with us. It would be a kindness to two old people who have lost both their children!"

Maggie beamed her delight at this invitation, though native caution prevented her from making her acceptance effusive. 'And then, dear," Mrs. Falkenheim continued, "you must come and stay with us in Bayswater for a week or two, just to get a glimpse of the London season. You say your friends live in the country; it would be a great pity for you to spend June in the country. August, yes; when everything is over!" The old woman looked eager as a child as she spoke to Maggie about the excitements of the London summer. "I should like to give a little dance for you, my dear. It makes an interest. With your hair and colouring you ought to be a wonderful success." She sighed portentously.

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"My little Rebecca, who died when she was thirteen, would just have been coming out this year!"

Maggie, inwardly thanking her stars that Fate had stifled "little Rebecca" before her own appearance, looked as sympathetic as she could contrive, while her eyes shone with the excitement of anticipation. Life was almost unbearably exciting! She had been invited to stay in one of the most fashionable hotels in the world, an hotel that she had read of in *Vogue*, in *Harper's Bazaar*, in *Town Topics*, and in all the other society papers. And then she was to stay in Bayswater for the London season, and be really *introduced* to all the nobs—not only gape at them from a distance! Her excitement burned her like fire. . . .

With Cherbourg drawing nearer every minute, the hard and practical side of Maggie's character became obscured, and an unsuspected capacity for living in the heart of a dream revealed itself. The experience, as the April sunshine grew warmer on her cheek while she waited in her long chair for the ship to carry her to France, linked itself to those other radiant experiences which made milestones in her life. There was a summer in early childhood which she had spent at a fruit farm on the shores of Lake Ontario with an aunt and uncle and young cousins. She remembered the warmth of the sun on her bare skin when she and Loo had run off one day to bathe in the creek. Then there was an afternoon when they had lain on their backs in hammocks under the fruit trees, and dozed in the shade, talking. There was no apparent reason why she should remember that afternoon; nothing had happened; she had just been happy. But whenever she had been happy since it had always come vividly into her mind. Later there was one hectic week of friendship with an English boy called

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Jacky Bruce. Five years ago it was, that idyll, and she had only been seventeen and a half then. Jacky was about eighteen, a midshipman—a "bit of old Europe" stranded for a week in the great Canadian port. He had "picked her up" on the ferry going to St. Helen's Island, one afternoon, with the swiftness and aplomb characteristic of his profession. She seemed to visualise him as vaulting over five-barred gates, swarming up rope-ladders, seizing her round the waist, and abducting her with as much veneration as if she were the image of a saint. The veneration part of the adventure was as novel as the abduction, and touched some spring inside her which unloosed a flood of inherited longings. Her mother, who had died in giving her birth, had been an actress in an English touring company which had visited Montreal about four-and-twenty years ago. Maggie did not even know her mother's surname, but talking to Jacky Bruce had made her wonder if by some chance she could have been anything like what she imagined his sisters to be—that is to say, a perfect lady. She knew perfect ladies were often "bad," and she had once heard grandmother Carter tell a friend that her mother was "a bad lot." There was no photograph of the late Mrs. Andrew Carter in existence, save one which Maggie had discovered in a drawer in which she was supposed not to look. She had annexed this, and for eight years she preserved it without being discovered. As she grew towards womanhood, the faded picture exercised a fascination over her. The large, plaintive eyes which looked out of the photograph seemed to contain some urgent message, and as she struggled through the mysteries of adolescence the longing to discover what the message was became painful. She knew instinctively that her mother was quite different from her father. She had come from

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England, from London; the life she knew best, and loved, was the life they lived over there in England. Almost from the day of her discovery of her mother's portrait Maggie determined to get across to England as soon as she could. It was her first and greatest ambition, and as the years passed it became an *idée fixe*.

Her girlhood in Price Street was well fitted for the growth of desires of this kind, for she never learnt to think of anyone but herself, and made no home ties. From an early age she disliked her morose Scotch father and hated the chapel where he preached. Grandmother Carter, with her corkscrew ringlets and wheezy cough, she disliked still more. She had never met anyone to like at all until the advent of Jacky Bruce. Perhaps it was this loveless upbringing which had made her so singularly lacking in moral sensitiveness. Almost from her cradle wrong had existed in her eyes exclusively in discovery. It was perfectly logical that with the installation of the cash register in Price Street her desire to rob the till should have vanished at once. Previously, she had been accustomed, as a matter of course, to annex all the coins she could lay hands on without being found out. If risk of discovery entered into the adventure, her temptations automatically expired. Maggie quickly found out all her father's peculations, and her contempt for religion increased enormously when, at the age of thirteen, she watched him sanding the sugar for the ensuing week, just before setting out to preach in the chapel. Getting on, acquiring money, cheating people when you got the chance to do so successfully and without loss of kudos, consulting always one's personal advantage—these were the aims and objects of life as represented in her Price Street home. On the emotional side, however, Andrew Carter let himself go in his chapel. Sentiment and self-

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importance were stimulated there as if by a kind of emotional dram-drinking, and year after year, by this Sunday dope, he was able to plod with fair contentment through the week. Maggie, being quite insensible to the appeal of her father's religion, and being also her mother's daughter, imbibed the parental selfishness without achieving the contentment. Her dissatisfaction, acting on her ardent imagination, made her first build dream castles, then work to realise them in solid stone. For all of her that was not dreamer, action, constant and continuous, was a necessity for every conscious moment. She had no scruples in being picked up by Jacky Bruce since she did not know anyone, excepting her father, whose opinion, if outraged on this point, would have mattered to her. And as she had early made herself an expert in her father's movements, she had no fear that he would find her out. Looking back from her seat on the promenade deck of the *Majestic,* with Cherbourg drawing momentarily nearer, the delicious flavour of that early adventure was like the flavour of the sun-warmed sea air. He was like a little fairy prince, bless him! He had treated her with a shy reverence mixed with devilry that was enchanting, and had been content with giving her hot, friendly, boyish kisses. She knew instinctively that he was no more properly "grown up" than she was! And he had not seriously encroached on the one part of her nature about which she was timid and felt insecure. She looked on her virtue as a possession to be carefully guarded until it could be bartered to the highest advantage. What made her nervous was her ignorance of the nature of the attacks, from within herself, against which she would have to guard it. She had never, so far, wanted to yield. Would it be difficult to refuse when the time came? Her extensive knowledge of evil, since

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it was entirely theoretical, did not help her in the essential point. Sometimes she wished Jacky had been a little more adventurous—had revealed just *something* of the mysteries which she was trying to fathom. Perhaps if he had put a little more ginger into his kisses the dangerous emotions might have fluttered her bosom. They hadn't. She owed many things to Jacky, but not that.

The American boy whose advances had annoyed her before began to smile at her again, as if intending to renew the conversation. He was a nice enough boy if she had not had a standard of comparison. That was where Jacky Bruce came in; he had given her a taste for the best. Something in his clear blue eyes and well-bathed, firmly knit body, something in his ingenuous honesty and *niceness,* had spoiled her for inferior youths. In her searches for an equal to Jacky to act as his successor—searches which had gone on with desperation, but without result, during the two years she had spent at Estelle's—she had made numbers of men friends. They had taught her something about books and music and pictures, and how to use her knife and fork, and the names of wines; and all of them had confirmed her in the belief acquired at Madame Valloton's that Paris was the promised land. Her mind had blossomed miraculously under the tuition of males whose intentions were, in every case, strictly dishonourable. What Maggie had taught *them* in return was the ease with which an utterly raw, uneducated girl of the lower-middle classes can bamboozle even intelligent men. She just turned round and trampled on them. It amazed her to see the success which almost invariably attended this operation. As a child she had perceived that a pretty girl has a mysterious advantage over a normally developed man; and with her to possess any kind of power was to use it remorselessly.

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"Well, I conclude you will be in Paris within twelve hours, Miss Carter," Van Bergen remarked imperturbably. He was still smiling as if he belonged to some "league of bright faces," pledged to make the world more cheerful.

Maggie was not quite so crushing now. Within a few moments she would have to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Falkenheim; there would be the bustle and confusion of landing very shortly.

She smiled back at him. "Yes, at last! Thank goodness!"

"Jolly to be back again, isn't it?" he agreed. "Where are you staying this time?"

"This time!" she echoed, with one of those flashes of candour from which liars often get their best effects, "why, I've never been to France before, nor Europe either! I think it's the 'Capitol' we've taken rooms at."

"That will be fine," said Van Bergen. "I'm going on to Paris, too, after I've been to London to see my tailor. I've wirelessed for a room at the 'Norfolk,' that's close by the 'Capitol,' you know, in the Place Vendôme. The 'Capitol' is in the Rue de Rivoli." Van Bergen did not like her to think he wore American clothes except when his English tailor was not available.

"You must let me come to call one day next week. May I?"

"Why, yes," said Maggie graciously, scenting invitations from this millionaire's son. She always accepted invitations, on the principle that all invitations may *lead to something*. "I reckon you'll show me round more than what Mr. and Mrs. Falkenheim will!"

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CHAPTER II

MAGGIE'S first few days in Paris passed as in a dream. Each night, when she laid her head on the soft, frilled pillow in her big bedroom in the "Capitol," excitement struggled with exhaustion. Exhaustion always won, but she would fall asleep with confused images of the day's sights and events chasing one another through her brain. Everything was new, everything a delight, and a thousand times she congratulated herself on her initiative in investing her inheritance in thus "seeing life"—whatever further payments the future might have in store. The future—ah, she would have private houses of her own, still more gorgeous than the "Capitol," and cars and frocks and fabulously expensive soaps; and scents at twenty-five francs a bottle, like those she had seen in the Rue de la Paix and refrained from buying. She always thought of her future just before she fell asleep; it made her sleep happily.

Although familiar from her earliest youth with French-speaking people, nothing could have been stranger than Paris to Maggie's raw but keen eyes. The flood of new sensations dazed her; the concentration of rapturous, new experiences—since she was like wax to impressions—was almost more than she could assimilate in the time. The people she saw in the streets interested her particularly, and she thought many of them far more magnificent than the buildings. As far as buildings went, they could do you a good line in *them* away out in Montreal. But she had never seen a rich Canadian look quite so sumptuous as the people she saw in their cars in the Champs Elysées,

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or lunching at Voisin's or Ledoyen's, or driving in the Bois. To her these *élégantes* seemed to have reached the summit of human splendour, and as she feverishly sized them up and realised that "stripped she could give any one of them points and a beating," the desire to reach their altitudes and to be attired as they were grew almost insupportable. Her ambitions became clarified and precise. She contrived to forget all about Madame Aicard—except for the few moments when the train from Cherbourg was passing the little houses, bowered in chestnut trees, of Bois de Colombes—and Mrs. Falkenheim was too tactful to ask her if she wanted to call on her friend. Maggie had no desire for her relations with the excellent Madame Valloton to be discovered; she decided, therefore, to obliterate all thought of the lady to whom she had been recommended.

In shopping with Mrs. Falkenheim, Maggie contrived, with the aid of her intimate knowledge of the dress-making business, to spend as little as possible with the maximum effect. "I can't afford to be extravagant, you know," she had said confidentially, and the result of this confidence, together with a longing glance at a new model at Doucet's which suited her to perfection, had resulted in the gift of a magnificent ball frock, delivered in due course to her room at the "Capitol." It was characteristic of Maggie that on this happy occasion it was on the success of her manœuvre that she first congratulated herself. Mrs. Falkenheim's generosity occurred to her only as an after-thought.

So strange had Paris and its inhabitants been to her at first that it was little short of miraculous the speed with which Maggie grew acclimatised, the ease with which the unaccustomed splendours of hotel and restaurant became familiar. Within a day or two the tall houses,

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the crowded streets and boulevards, the innumerable cafés where people spent hours watching the passers-by, the jostling, cosmopolitan throngs on the pavements, the shops devoted to "horrid" books and pictures, the pretty shop-girls with their powdered faces, the shady chestnut trees, the smart infants with their nurses in the Parc Monceau or the Champs Elysées, and even the mysterious "directions" of the Métro became as natural to her as if she had been born among them. A few days more, and it seemed impossible that she could ever not have known them; and Mr. Falkenheim himself bowed to her knowledge of the Métro and the autobus routes. A little fire of humour would lurk at the bottom of his dark eyes when he glanced at her, and his wrinkled, Hebraic face would look ten years younger. Her freshness and vividness were a perpetual delight to him, and in watching the glamour reflected in her eyes he recovered some of his own ardent youth. "I can see you think Paris is Heaven, my dear," he once said to her, with a laugh, a few days after their arrival, "and while you think so, it *is* Heaven—for you. Keep your delusions as long as you can," he added wistfully. Maggie went on thinking Paris Heaven for some days longer, and the only thing which made the slighest flaw in her happiness was her realisation of all it had to teach her. She always spotted her mistakes, and spotted Israel spotting them, and to flounder into eating asparagus at Voisin's with a knife and fork—and a steel knife too—would spoil a whole day for her. She felt more and more that Mr. Falkenheim was a person to reckon with; his acuteness frightened her. Realizing that, since everything depended on his good nature, it would be safer to make up to him than to constitute herself exclusively his wife's friend, she modelled her conduct accordingly. Whenever she was

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not busy accompanying Mrs. Falkenheim on shopping expeditions and had no appointment with Van Bergen—who had called, as he had promised on the steamer he would call, and had displayed every eagerness to "show her around"—she made a point of acting the part of dutiful daughter to her benefactor. Israel Falkenheim was one of the world's greatest dealers in all kinds of works of art—in pictures, furniture, tapestries, china—everything in which art has ever been employed to beautify life. He owned a great shop in Bond Street—Harland Brothers—which he seldom visited; and now in his old age he had nominally retired from active business, merely allowing himself to be consulted as a specialist by favoured clients contemplating colossal transactions, or by students and learned persons anxious to make use of his knowledge. His was not really a business, however, from which it was possible to retire. The things in which he had always dealt were a passion with him; only death itself could put out the fire of his collector's zeal.

He tried to awaken in Maggie some appreciation of art, by no means unsuccessfully. Pictures and beautiful things had meant nothing to her hitherto, because she had never seen any, but she realised that they formed part of the background to the great social gathering to which she had invited herself. And when Israel showed her how to look at them, she came to like them for their own sakes. She spent several pleasant mornings with him at the Louvre and at the Luxembourg. At first it embarrassed her to stare at such a picture as Manet's "Olympia" in the company of a man—even an old man—but, seeing many austere Englishwomen carrying red guide-books and doing the same, she concluded it must be all right. Israel seemed not to notice anything

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odd; his interest was all in colour schemes and composition, in the thickness or thinness of the paint, and his delight in the picture was clearly but slightly connected with its subject. Once in the Luxembourg when she had thought it proper to blush, he had looked at her quite fiercely. "The human body is divine, my dear, and it was made before your Paris frocks. You should not let the truth embarrass you; it is of the *bourgeoisie*, that!" The sting was in the tail of this remark, and Maggie felt it to be true. Had the old man scented Price Street? She studied Rodin's "Age d'Airain" attentively, anxious to correct the bad impression. He sent her to the Salon and to the Indépendents with Mrs. Falkenheim, saying that he was too old for that sort of thing, and that the gravel floor of the Indépendents hurt his corns, and that the dead mass of vile painting in the Salon gave him neuralgia. When he saw, however, that Maggie's interest in pictures was more than the frivolous surface interest of the average society girl, and that she was eager to learn, he took her with him to see some of the Jewish dealers with whom he had business relations. They set off one morning, in a yellow *fiacre* with smooth and bulging pneumatic tyres, and a driver who by a miracle was cheerful—as cheerful as the brilliant April sunshine—to see some Goyas about which he had just heard. Maggie enjoyed the drive through the crowded streets. She was conscious of looking her best, and realised that her blonde freshness was admirably set off by the arresting old man by her side, whose grey felt top-hat with its broad black band, and shabby black great-coat, made a foil for her gay plumage. She enjoyed the admiring glances that were cast at her with discreet intentness by all the men; and the disdain combined with curiosity, shown in the women's looks, she innocently took to be the

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compliment of envy. Their cab made its way slowly across the Place de l'Opéra and down the Boulevard des Italiens till it reached the narrow fissure of the Rue Laffitte. The great white church crowning the hill of Montmartre seemed, in the distance, to float in misty golden air, to be immaterial as a vision. The cab continued a little way down the dark street till it stopped at an unpretentious doorway, and in a moment Maggie found herself in a long, dimly lighted shop. The walls were lined with books, like a library. A heavy green carpet covered the floor, and in the middle of the shop was a low and broad table with an electric light globe, shaded so as to throw the light only on the table, immediately above it. A large portfolio was open under the light, and two people were bending over it—an old man in a black velvet skull-cap and greasy black frock coat, and a younger man whose face Maggie could not see. In all parts of the shop similar bulging portfolios leant against the bookcases, accumulating dust.

"Bon jour mon vieux. Ca va?" said Israel cheerfully, and the two men shook hands and began, to Maggie's annoyance, to talk rapidly to one another in French. Their conversation enabled her to examine the companion of the dealer in the skull-cap. He returned her gaze with a kind of quizzical interest which nettled her. He had dark hair and a pale, ivory complexion, with a broad forehead lit by humorous grey eyes. His age might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty-five, and to her eyes he looked rather like a Catholic priest or a doctor, those being almost the only examples of the intellectual classes which she had come across. His clothes were very different from Van Bergen's, who always looked exactly like an advertisement for men's costume in *Munsey's Magazine;* but though shabby they

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seemed to fit him. Mr. Falkenheim interrupted her investigations by remembering his manners. "But, my dear Jacobs," he said, "let me present you to my friend Miss Carter."

Mr. Jacobs bent over her hand and muttered his expressions of enchantment. "And this is Mr. Godfrey Levett," Mr. Falkenheim added, with a smile that enveloped both Maggie and the Englishman.

"And now you would like to see my Goyas, Israel," said Mr. Jacobs. "They are beautiful, beautiful."

"And you won't sleep for a week after looking at them," Mr. Levett remarked to Maggie in a confidential undertone which she thought rather forward. Mr. Jacobs hobbled to the dim end of his shop and threw open a door leading into a large annex, lighted from the roof, which was as cheerful as the shop was dark. It was a miniature picture gallery containing about a dozen masterpieces. The roof windows were swathed in folds of white muslin, so that the light fell with perfect evenness on the canvases. The Goyas which formed the old man's pride were five in number, the finest of them being a variation of the picture "Jeunesse," which is one of the glories of the gallery at Lille. This picture of a dark-eyed Spanish girl with black lace mantilla, covering her black hair and half veiling her voluptuous bosom, stretching out her hand over which bends a hideous gipsy fortune-teller, thrilled Maggie at once. There was an excitement in the stormy background, in the dark blue and grey clouds, the sinister white houses lit up by the disturbing light in the sky, in the passionate glance of the young woman and the cruel gleam in the gipsy's eyes, which made her shiver with emotion. The very violence of the conception appealed to her violent nature. The other smaller pictures did not appeal to her as much

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as the *chef d'œuvre* of the collection. There were two portraits of Spanish gentlemen, whose large, bony, and solemn faces displayed a pathetic combination of stupidity and high breeding. The artist had been almost gentle with his subjects; perhaps the edge of his mordant humour had been blunted by large payments. The remaining two pictures were quite small. One represented a prostitute in prison, sitting up and clasping her knees. Her eyes were shut, her face dead white, her mouth open.

"I reckon she looks as if she's going to be sick," was Maggie's disgusted comment,—"fairly on the bink after a wet night. While as for this one"—she pointed to the remaining picture, a rough sketch showing a murderer on a platform raised above the jostling throng of spectators, on the point of being garrotted for his crime.—"as for this one, he looks as though his mother ought to have done that for him young!"

She noticed that Mr. Levett laughed immoderately at this sally, while Israel turned on her that beady, appraising glance which her difficulties with the asparagus had brought down on her. Falkenheim's look made her suspect Mr. Levett's hilarity, so she turned her back on him while the two dealers were discussing technical points, in French, in connection with the pictures and the prices they might be expected to fetch. She was noticeably cold to Levett when they said good-bye, giving him a curt nod over her shoulder in contrast to her cordial handshake with Mr. Jacobs.

"Nice young man, that," Mr. Falkenheim remarked absently as they drove off to pick up Mrs. Falkenheim for luncheon. "He has talent, too. I dare say we shall see something of him in London. There is one of his plays on now at the 'First Avenue,' and I believe it is a

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success. . . . He knows a good deal about pictures for an amateur."

"I thought he seemed rather shabby and dull," Maggie remarked loftily.

"Ah, my dear," chuckled Mr. Falkenheim, "artists nearly always are both those things, if they have talent. It's only the artistic who *look* important and cut a dash in drawing-rooms. . . ."

"No, I shouldn't think he'd cut a dash in drawing-rooms," said Maggie. "Most ladies want something more on the spot than that." Mr. Falkenheim rested his hand on hers and smiled at her his curious smile, which always made her feel "discovered." She was glad to change the conversation on to securer ground.

That afternoon she had arranged to go motoring with Harry Van Bergen, and she was able to begin some useful exercises in comparison. Van Bergen was essentially a man to "cut a dash in drawing-rooms." She divined his technique, and as she saw more of him and found that his perpetual smile of impersonal cheerfulness never grew warmer or more intimate, she suspected its cause. It wasn't just amiability, admiration—it was a consummate social mask. There were occasions when she came up against a wall of tact. He avoided meeting the Falkenheims, for instance, as far as he could do so without giving offence. She wondered if this were because they were Jews. She remembered having heard that Jews were not admitted into "society." On the other hand, she had always been brought up to believe that the rich were the lords of the earth, and she was convinced that the Falkenheims would be considered rich, even in America. Van Bergen seemed full of these tactfully concealed social reservations, and she even suspected him of exercising them in regard to herself

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and his numerous other English and American friends in Paris. Had Van Bergen cared, he could have introduced her to all sorts of amusing people, but the opportunities seemed always to be avoided. Once, however, when they were lunching at a restaurant at Versailles, his manœuvring had not been able to prevent an encounter, and Maggie had been conscious of a feeling of irritation behind the all-enveloping, ever-present smile of her companion. The friends to whom Van Bergen found himself forced to introduce her were two English women called Elkington—a mother and daughter. They impressed her at once as being "the real thing," and her instinct, in this case, was by no means at fault. Rachel Elkington was quite a different type from any with which she was familiar. She had never before seen an obviously plain English woman who took the trouble to be exquisitely dressed. And Miss Elkington combined with her look of distinction an absence of desire to attract notice which filled Maggie with envious reflection. Mrs. Elkington, with her white hair, fat face, and dry, disturbing laughter, if not so agreeable, contrived to look equally distinguished. The small grey eyes, that peered occasionally through lorgnettes, looked as shrewd as old Falkenheim's and even more satirical. Maggie fancied herself being correctly derived from Price Street, when they rested on her as Van Bergen made the introduction.

There was an intangible something in the way Van Bergen presented her to his friends which made Maggie's blood boil, and she determined that from that day onwards she would see no more of him. Her anger made her trebly anxious to go down well with the Elkingtons, and she exerted herself to the utmost. From the charming way in which they both shook hands with her—she assimilated their manner immediately, and could repro-

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duce it to perfection a few hours later—she realised at once that she had come upon an educational opportunity.

The conversation began rather tamely about the beauties of the Palace and of the weather.

"There's such an ugly cathedral; have you been inside it?" Mrs. Elkington remarked. "But I'm sure you haven't. You spent all your time at the Trianons, didn't you? So charming, I always think, especially the Petit Trianon."

Mrs. Elkington poured out conversation to casual strangers like tepid water from a jug. She belonged to the school which holds that it doesn't matter *what* you say, so long as you say enough of it. Miss Elkington was more inclined to mind her "p's" and "q's," and her intense interest in the things about her made her more anxious to avoid platitudes. All the ardour of her nature, inexperienced in love or child-bearing, had been poured into artistic appreciations; and what people were apt to describe with a sneer as her "refinement" was the most genuine thing about her.

"I adore Versailles," she remarked, smiling at Maggie, a little flush of enthusiasm making her face quite handsome. "I think that view from the terrace—looking across the fountains down to the lake, between the two woods—must be one of the loveliest effects in landscape gardening in the whole world. It is certainly finer than anything at Fontainebleau or St. Germain. Have you read Henri de Régnier's book, 'La Cité des Eaux'?" she asked. Miss Elkington blushed prettily as if caught in a display of erudition, when she noticed Maggie's rather strained smile and shake of the head. She was one of these gentle souls who, when they make tactless remarks, suffer more acutely than their victims.

"I can hardly read a word of French," Maggie re-

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plied, "though I talk it fairly well. I ought really to know French perfectly, seeing that I am a French-Canadian!" This flash of inspiration had come to her in her rage at noticing a flicker of annoyance which had crossed Van Bergen's face. How she cursed herself now for having let him kiss her on the boat, the day Mrs. Falkenheim had told her he was the son of millionaire Van Bergen, of the Great Southern Railroad!

"My name is really Cartier, you know," she added, turning towards him. "I can't imagine why poppa dropped the 'i'—I suppose for convenience—but I always spell it in the old way myself."

Maggie noticed with delight that this went down splendidly with the Elkingtons. They seemed to think it "awfully interesting" to be a French-Canadian. Van Bergen's smile once more played on unimpaired. Not a flicker of an eyelid showed if he remembered the pioneer who gives his name to one of the largest squares in Montreal. She found her irritation with him in the highest degree stimulating. It occurred to her to contrive, before Van Bergen knew where he was, to make him offer to drive the Elkingtons back to Paris. While the big touring car hurried them smoothly back to their hotel, Maggie talked to the mother and daughter almost exclusively. She felt herself conveying a successful snub to Van Bergen. She would let him see that a Canadian girl was not to be treated "like that" in the presence of people like the Elkingtons—just because she had once let him kiss her. She reflected on the dangers attending too rapid embraces, and registered a vow that her kisses should be much more expensive in future. She wasn't going to cheapen herself any more to rats like Van Bergen!

"Here we are! It *has* been jolly," Miss Elkington

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remarked, as the car drew up at their modest hotel in the Étoile district. She smiled charmingly at Maggie. "We must meet again," she said. "Do look us up one afternoon. We are here for another fortnight before we go back to London!" She turned to Van Bergen and joined her thanks to her mother's for his amiability in bringing them back in his car, but not before Van Bergen had overheard her farewell to Maggie. His mask-like smile, however, successfully concealed his feelings, and when he dropped Maggie at the "Capitol" in time for dinner she got, as she expressed it, "no change" out of him for her curt dismissal. He went on smiling, merry and bright, a live proposition, alert and efficient as the hero of a story in a smart American magazine. Maggie felt once more that she had bumped her head against finesse. It wasn't all plain sailing, this social stunt. A lovely girl didn't just have to show herself to create a "fu-*ror*," as she had always imagined. There were a thousand things to learn. She would evidently have to use her brains as well as her beauty. She could not understand how it was that Van Bergen did not lay himself at her feet to be trampled on. She had always understood that men were just animals where women were concerned—that a pretty woman could do what she liked with a man, whose raging passions made him a mere puppet in her hands. She had met men who would have given her anything they possessed for a kiss. She had let Van Bergen hold her in his arms in a secluded corner on the boat and kiss her very prettily—on the day she heard about his millions—but he hadn't seemed specially unnerved by any raging passions. There was too much of the perfect little gentleman about him to please her! She went up to her room meditating a revenge which should be complete and ghastly.

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After dinner that night, sitting in the palm court of the "Capitol" with Mr. and Mrs. Falkenheim, she sprang on them the interesting announcement of her Gallic origin which had been such a success with the Elkingtons. She felt the warm black eye of Israel turned on her in a glance of mingled humour, admiration, and malice as she naively explained her intention of reverting to "the old spelling." Mrs. Falkenheim said, in her motherly way, that she thought it was "very nice" and that she would have to remember it in future in making introductions. Israel said nothing for a moment. Then he remarked, as though it had no reference to her revelation: "I once had an old friend called Solomon. One day he discovered that his father had made a mistake about their name. It wasn't Solomon at all: it was Sheridan-Villiers. So he had to go off to get some new calling cards printed, he, he, he!" He leant across and patted Maggie's hand with a gesture which made her bubble with annoyance.

"My name really *is* Cartier," she replied, haughtily, and since she was not to be thwarted by ridicule, Cartier it remained.

As the days slipped by towards the date fixed for their removal from Paris to London, Maggie worked very hard to consolidate her position with Mrs. Falkenheim, but always she felt Israel's mocking black eye upon her. Did he suspect that she was no heiress, but only a little Scotch grocer's daughter? Had someone told him about the Price Street shop? She had always heard that Jews were consumed with suspicion and no more to be trusted with private letters than she was, and that they had "wonderful ways of finding out." But how could he have found out except by guessing, unless perhaps she had betrayed herself out of her own mouth? It was true he was always asking her little tactful questions about

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her childhood or about her investments, which taxed her powers of lying to the utmost. The vague sense of insecurity which Israel aroused in her mind made her indefatigable in regard to the Elkingtons. She had never been liked by the other girls in Montreal, whom she thought of as being, without exception, "jealous cats," but Rachel Elkington seemed to have taken a real fancy to her. Curiously enough, Maggie discovered that Levett, the playwright, whom Mr. Falkenheim had introduced to her at the picture shop, was a great friend of the Elkingtons, and she met him once or twice at their hotel.

Maggie was sharp enough to see how much she might profitably learn from this gentle, cultivated woman with her unfaltering instinct for clothes; and by adopting an attitude of innocence and ignorance and willingness to have "her mind broadened," she struck a chord which vibrated sympathetically in Rachel Elkington's bosom. Rachel Elkington was typical of the nice Englishwoman nearing thirty who does not anticipate being asked in marriage. Her unsatisfied but unadmitted hunger for the commonplace experiences of her sex had given her a special type of intellectual ardour. She longed to show other women how much there was in the world which they didn't realise, to make their outlook less narrow and domestic, to lead them to the magic casements of culture. It had not yet been borne in on her that these casements open on the foam of perilous seas; the perils, for her, were yet to come, and her eagerness was untroubled. It gave her keen pleasure to talk to Maggie about books and pictures and the beautiful things of life; about the wonders of Italy and of Spain; about music, dancing, and the play. She took Maggie with her to the Opéra Comique to hear *Pelléas et Mélisande*, explaining the story so

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that she could follow the intention of the music, and lent her novels and books of poetry. Maggie's crude and sometimes vapid comments sounded like a delicious Colonial *naïveté* to Miss Elkington's ultra-refined ear. She visualised Maggie as some beautiful wild flower; even her odd Canadian drawl seemed to her delightful in its freshness. When Maggie announced in accents of quiet pride that she was going to spend the rest of the summer in Bayswater, Rachel was genuinely pleased at the thought of renewing so stimulating an acquaintance. "How lucky," she replied, adding with a faint blush, "we really live almost in Bayswater too. Our house is in Hyde Park Street, number 218. You must be sure to write to me when you reach London, and let us see something of you." Maggie promised gladly that she would write. She was rather abashed, however, to note that the word Bayswater did not seem to have quite the magic which she had anticipated.

"By the way, Miss Cartier," Rachel went on, "I have so often wondered what your Christian name is. I am sure you must have a pretty name, you are so lovely!" Miss Elkington blushed again when she said "you are so lovely," as though she had caught herself being inadvertently emotional.

"My own name is Rachel," she added, before Maggie could reply. "Do call me by it! It is so much less formal than Miss Elkington!"

Maggie paused for a moment, in some embarrassment. She had long thought her name anything but high class, and did not at all relish the notion of owning up to Maggie. Hastily casting about in her mind for a substitute, she remembered the name of the heroine of a smart "society" novel which Mrs. Falkenheim had recently lent her—Margot de Montmorency. Margot!

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That would do splendidly; it had *chic*, it was Parisian! The Margot in the novel had been a daughter of one of the smartest families of the French nobility, so that it *must* be all right. Rachel glanced at her with an encouraging smile when she hesitated.

"I was baptized Margaret," she said at last, "but everyone at home always called me Margot. You see," she added, "we are really of French extraction."

"Yes, I remember you told me so at Versailles. I should love to have some French blood in my veins," said Rachel with enthusiasm. "I must call you Margot too, may I?" Maggie assured her that she might. She was overjoyed at her happy inspiration, and enchanted with the new name she had given herself. This renaming seemed to have a fateful significance—to mark definitely a fresh stage in her career. The life and adventures of Miss Margot Cartier—ah, they would make a very different story from that of Maggie Carter's squalid upward struggles!

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CHAPTER III

AFTER the departure of the Elkingtons, Paris seemed to Margot to become suddenly very much duller. She missed Rachel, and grew impatient to follow her new friend to London and to start out on the great campaign to which she had so long looked forward. One of the results of her friendship with the Elkingtons had been a subtle change which she had noticed in Van Bergen's manner toward her. She thought now that she detected in him less hesitation, the absence of a display of tact designed to conceal a consciousness of social difference, even a certain amorous warmth. The more he showed a "coming-on" disposition, however, the more she snubbed him, until at last he too left Paris. She hoped he left it suitably mortified. In any case, before he went—with characteristic neatness—he sent her a bouquet of roses to her room, with a note expressing his thanks for the jolly time she had given him and the hope that they might meet again in London or New York. The note seemed to her to be the symbol of victory, and her self-confidence increased in consequence. The sting of old blunders was wiped out when she saw the roses which made her bedroom fragrant. The mistakes of the past three weeks had indeed been innumerable, but she had known how to profit by almost all of them.

On the night before her departure for London, as Mrs. Falkenheim's maid was brushing out her pale gold hair for her, while she was making her toilette before dinner, she looked at herself earnestly in the glass and took stock of her position. She reviewed the events of

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the past month. What a thrilling, wonderful month it had been! Half a lifetime seemed to have been compressed into it. As she gazed at her own reflection, she could not but admit that never in her life before had she looked so lovely. The fire in her china-blue eyes seemed to vivify and brighten her whole being. "Well, so far so good!" she thought, with a thrill of satisfaction.

Although she hardly realised it, she had indeed picked up far more in the last few hectic weeks than many girls ever learn in a year of genteel "finishing" at Neuilly. What years it seemed since she had left Canada. It was only thirty-five days! She had crossed a great gulf during that time, over which there could never be any returning. She could only go forward, and go forward she would or perish in the attempt.

Godfrey Levett joined them at dinner, but went almost immediately afterwards, so that she did not get much chance of talking to him beyond making a few commonplace remarks about the Elkingtons. He looked, however, as if he would have liked an opportunity of chatting with her alone. His expression was curiously demure, and she thought he seemed at moments faintly embarrassed. But somewhere in his eyes there lurked a mingled look of mockery and shrewdness, which made her keep on wondering what he thought of her. She rather wished she had not snubbed him so severely that day in the Rue Laffitte.

When Levett had gone, Mrs. Falkenheim retired to bed, pleading a headache and the fatigues of the journey on the coming day. Mr. Falkenheim took Margot with him to listen to the band in the palm court of the hotel, and they sat and drank their coffee in cane armchairs, with a round, glass-topped table between them.

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They were well placed to observe the cosmopolitan crowd of guests. Margot hated to be anywhere where she could not "watch the people." It was the continuous and absorbing occupation of her waking hours.

Israel smoked his cigar in comfortable contemplation and watched *her*.

"Well, Miss Carter," he said at last, "so you will open in London to-morrow!"

"You talk as if I was an actress," she remarked, not quite concealing her irritation.

"Oh, no, my dear, not an actress. . . . "

"An adventuress then!"

Israel smiled. "We all have our little adventures. My life has been full of them. And you, Miss Carter, I think you will have your adventures, too!"

Margot was undecided for a moment whether to be haughty or frank. Distrust of her ability to carry things off with a consistently high hand eventually decided her to be frank. The atmosphere of suspense was getting on her nerves. If she made a clean breast of it she felt certain of getting him on her side.

"Of course, I want to get on," she remarked, smiling at him.

"To marry?"

"No, not just to marry. To marry rather . . . . rather importantly!"

"That should be easy enough for you. You are indeed lovely: and men are still men. It is all the better, also, that you have money of your own. My wife and I will find you a crowd of 'important' husbands. You shall take your choice. If you want a lord, why it is easy if your fortune is sufficient!" He patted her hand affectionately.

"My fortune is sufficient to keep me alive for nearly

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one year—if I'm careful," she remarked, quietly. "So now you know. I never *said* I was an heiress, did I? I've got somewhere about £500!" Having burnt her boats by blurting out the truth, Margot suffered an agony of suspense. The old man's jaw dropped, and he turned on her a prolonged stare. "Oh, what a fool I am," she thought, "I've gone and ruined everything! He'll offer me a job as his wife's companion or as governess to somebody's children. But I won't be a companion—I won't—I won't!"

Her lips pressed themselves more closely together as if to hold in a torrent of words, while her eyes searched in the silence the wrinkled face in front of her, from which the two little eyes shone like black beads. She knew instinctively that she had cheapened herself with him. She realised that he would regard her acceptance of his wife's present of a ball frock and of their hospitality as dishonest, now that she had told him how much she really needed them. How absurd and unreasonable he was! If she had been a rich girl all these things would have been wasted on her.

"You are a plucky little soul, and no mistake," the old man eventually remarked. "I'll keep your secret—for a time at all events. You shan't have to break into your nest-egg for another six months, I promise you that. After then, we'll see."

The singular insolence of his tone—that racial insolence behind which the Jew too often conceals his natural kindliness—stung her like a whip and blinded her to the real generosity of what he was saying. She felt inclined to get up and call him a blamed "Sheeny," any way, who ought to be proud that a Christian girl should condescend to stay with him in his rotten house. His sudden lack of respect for her, just because he had

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heard she was only "worth" £500, was exasperating. She felt inclined to tweak his nose and tell him she wasn't going to be sneered at by any "Ikey Mo," just as if she were a suit of old clothes he was trying to cheapen! All her lurid vocabulary of gutter invective rose to her lips, but got no further. She saw too clearly on which side her bread was buttered, for that. With heaving bosom and eyes lit up with the violence of her repressed emotions, she thanked him demurely. "You're very kind, Mr. Falkenheim," she said. "It's real good of you and Mrs. Falkenheim to give me a helping hand. My only other friends in England live quietly in the country in Dorsetshire, and wouldn't have been able to give me such a fine start. I shall always be grateful."

"Oh, you're worth backing all right," said Israel, with an admiration that was become familiarity. "And you will be able to patronise the old man yet, or I'm a Dutchman! But don't you say anything about all this to Mrs. Falkenheim. You shall stay with us till the end of November. Then we'll see! A bargain's a bargain, mind," he reminded her, as they went up in the lift to their rooms. "I don't promise anything beyond six months!"

"Six months," she muttered to herself after she had got into bed. "I'll make the pair of them ashamed of their damned bargains within six weeks."

She fell asleep dreaming of London the mighty, London the hub of the whole world, the earthly paradise, the city of the powerful and the rich.

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CHAPTER IV

It had always been a habit with Margot, for as long as she could remember, to spend half an hour before getting up in the morning in pretending that she was a princess with an elegant maid waiting to conduct her to a perfumed bath. Afterward the maid would help her on with her silk stockings and her luxurious clothes, and when dressed she would descend the marble staircase and "sail" into the waiting car for a little exercise before luncheon. Lying thoroughly warm in her narrow iron bedstead in her ugly little room in Price Street, with her face buried under the bedclothes, which shut out the dismal surroundings of reality, she could fancy herself "almost anybody." Oh, those half-hours of warmth and drowsy happiness! She would deliberately prepare for them by setting her alarm clock half an hour earlier than necessary, so that she could lie in bed without having to get up too soon and revel in her day-dreams. But however long she gave herself, her enjoyment was always eventually terminated by the raucous voice of Andrew Carter calling out, "Now, Maggie, you lazy slut. Ain't you going to get the breakfast? It's gone half-past seven!" Then there followed horrid moments with the tin basin and water-jug, which stood on the "dot and carry" washstand, underneath the picture of Sir Wilfrid Laurier attached to the wall by tin-tacks —ablutions in no way resembling the dreamed-of perfumed bath. After the hasty washing came the still hastier pulling on of stockings with holes in them, a "doing" of the hair admitted to be temporary, and the

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bundling on of skirt and blouse, followed by a dash below to the kitchen behind the shop, to fry bacon and make tea for her detested parent. Mr. Carter was never able to sympathise with his daughter's patent discontent. He attributed it—correctly enough, as it happened—to the fact that she was "just like her mother over again."

When Margot first woke up in her bedroom at the "Capitol," it seemed as though the most extravagant day-dreams of her girlhood had been realised. She no longer had to bury herself under coarse and scratchy bedclothes and "pretend"; she had but to open her eyes and look around her. By her side was a bell which she had only to touch to summon a servant who would get her anything she asked for; and when her bath had been prepared she would only have to drop into it some of the *sels de bain* she had bought at Houbigants' for it to be perfumed as exquisitely as the most fastidious princess could desire. She found difficulty in imagining greater luxury than this. Rich as she knew the Falkenheims to be, it did not occur to her that their house would hold any surprises. And Rachel Elkington had somehow taken the bloom even off Bayswater. Margot began to have vague suspicions about Bayswater.

In so far as her doubts concerned the comfort of the house in Richbourne Terrace, the first few minutes following her arrival set them completely at rest, for her acute instinct showed her at once the difference between its quiet splendours and the rather gaudy sumptuousness of the hotel. By the time she reached the house she had been prepared for splendours. Never would she forget her first fleeting vision of London as the train crossed the bridge into Charing Cross. It was indeed an unforgettable view, with the Houses of Parliament,

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the Cecil and Savoy Hotels, and a whole line of unknown, splendid buildings rising proudly from the barge-strewn river, in the wonderful May sunshine! The Falkenheims' big, smooth-running car met them at the station; a liveried footman busied himself with their luggage, and in a few moments they were being whirled through the strange, exciting London streets. Margot never forgot her first arrival at the house in Richbourne Terrace. One of the real English butlers of whom she had read in so many paper-covered novels opened the door for them, ushering them into a great hall paved with black and white marble, covered here and there by rugs. From the middle of this hall a broad marble staircase, with a kind of wrought steel baluster, led magnificently up to the drawing-room.

When Margot saw the room on the second floor which was to be her bedroom during her visit, she uttered a little "Oh!" of delight, and longed for the moment when she could be alone in it.

They had crossed from Boulogne by the morning boat, so that after some tea in a small sitting-room, which Mrs. Falkenheim called the boudoir, Maggie was invited to go upstairs and have a bath and "lie down" in her room before it was time to dress for dinner.

Such a bath it was; all of silver and white enamel, with taps that shot water at you from directions whence you least expected it!

After the bath she felt much too refreshed and excited to "lie down," but shut and locked the door on herself—with the instinct of the cat which hates being observed when lapping up its milk—and silently wallowed in the enchantment of her room. It was too lovely! The bed was broad and very low, of black lacquer, incrusted with gleaming mother-of-pearl. A bedspread of rose satin lay

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over it, and the lace-edged sheet of snowy lawn was partly turned back, disclosing a large, frilled pillow. All the rest of the furniture was in the same black lacquer; the walls of the room were covered with plain panelling, enamelled white; the thick pile carpet was of a mellow shade of *vieux-rose*. The outer window curtains were of black silk lightened by curious splashes of rose, the inner ones of the filmiest white muslin. On the chimney-piece stood a black Louis Quatorze clock, surmounted by a bronze group of gods and goddesses disporting on a cloud. The pendulum was a brass sun with rays, suggesting the glory of *le roi soleil*, and the dial of the clock had been adorned with painted amorets. The faint, mellow sound of its ticking—after the jarring click-click of the cheap alarum clock she had been used to in her childhood—was like sweet music to Margot. It made her *feel* a princess at last, just as every step she took on the carpet reminded her, by its contrast with the worn and chilly oil-cloth in her room at Price Street, of the success she had achieved already.

By one side of her bed, standing on the little round lacquer table, was a wooden case holding a row of new novels. Just above her head, when she was lying in bed, was arranged an electric lamp with a heavy rose shade. The switch was fixed at the side of the bed so that she could turn it on or off with the minimum of effort. In another part of the room stood a bookcase full of volumes bound in red leather, exquisitely tooled and adorned on either side with a coronet surmounting an initial. The edges of the books were heavily gilded, and their morocco bindings smelt oddly sumptuous. Margot was a little disappointed on opening them to find they were in French, but her disappointment was mitigated by the discovery that they were all illustrated with engravings of

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beautifully attired French marquises being made love to by elegant gentlemen on bended knee; of gods dallying in a shameless manner with naked goddesses in a world of rose-leaves and dim arbours; or of shepherds and shepherdesses neglecting to look after flocks of unreal sheep. One of the pictures—a girl yielding to an importunate lover—was entitled *"Au moins, soyez discret."* Margot liked the pictures of the marquises best, and studied with attention the elaborate details of their frocks, which looked as if they must be more extravagant than anything she had seen in Paris, at Premet or Paquin or Chéruit.

The room was certainly one to wake up in! Margot imagined how the maid would come in, in the morning, and draw aside the black silk curtains without making a sound, letting in a shaft of morning sunlight. Then the little tray with the early tea on it would be put down on the table by the side of the novels! Her reverie was broken into by the discreet knock of Mrs. Falkenheim's maid, Marie, who had come to help her dress for dinner.

Dinner on that wonderful first evening in the big Bayswater house was an event which, like her first vision of London, was to remain engraved on Margot's memory. Nothing that was to come later ever blotted out that thrill of having arrived, of being in the great and dreamed-of world. The butler and footman who waited on them were ever so much more splendid than the waiters in the Paris restaurants, and even Mr. and Mrs. Falkenheim seemed quite different and more imposing against a background of their own dark-panelled dining-room.

After dinner Mrs. Falkenheim and Margot went and sat in the great drawing-room on the first floor.

"I don't suppose you'll want to do anything very exciting to-night," said Mrs. Falkenheim in her fat voice. "I daresay you'll be quite willing to go to bed early, like

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me. I always go to bed at ten when I'm at home and we haven't got people in the house. I like plenty of rest!" Mrs. Falkenheim settled herself in her usual armchair by the window and took up her embroidery, prepared for Margot to carry on a gentle conversation. Israel came upstairs when the coffee was brought in, and the three of them relapsed for a while into a digestive silence, occupied with their own thoughts.

The evening breeze wafted into the room the peculiar odour of geraniums, from the big window-boxes which made all the outside of the house resplendent. And it brought with it also the sound of dance music from one or two of the houses in the terrace—faint, but disturbing in its appeal. Margot was passionately fond of dancing, and the sound thrilled her with a longing to begin her campaign without wasting a moment.

"That's Solly Abraham giving a dance for his Rebecca, I expect," said Mrs. Falkenheim, when the music became for a moment more distinct.

Mrs. Falkenheim relapsed once more into silence. She was a woman of immense silences. She would sit for hours awake, pleasantly ruminating on mysterious subjects. No one ever knew what it was she thought about during her hours of armchair meditation. When anything happened to prod her into speech she would go jogging along quite cheerfully. Solly's dance came back into her head after a prolonged pause and set her going. It reminded her of her own dead offspring and thus of the maternal activities which Margot's presence would make necessary. "We could have gone to Solly's dance, my dear, but I thought you would be too tired after your journey! I must talk to some friends on the telephone in the morning and see what we can arrange; and, of course, we must give a dance for you here. I must look

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at the newspapers to find a good day. Unfortunately, June is always crowded. One has to send out cards quite a month in advance."

Margot's interest in the dance in the house near by waned when she discovered that it was being given by one of her host's co-religionists, and her heart sank with the sudden fear that the Falkenheims might not know any Christians.

"I suppose you have heaps of society friends, Mrs. Falkenheim," she said in a wistful and demure tone which even Mrs. Falkenheim, who could be shrewd enough when she took the trouble, could see was intended to draw her out.

"Oh, not *friends*, my dear. Most of my friends are people like ourselves. We all live round about here, you know. I have friends in almost every house in Richbourne Terrace. And we aren't society people at all. Just quiet folk. Of course, we do know the other sort as well, and you shall have your good time, I promise you that. Israel was doing society about eight years ago in connection with some companies he was interested in—weren't you, dear?" she said, turning to her husband, "and we've still just kept in with it all."

"That was when I was opening the Connaught Gallery in Bond Street, with the Largillière Exhibition," said Israel. "I must say it cost me a lotta money, a great lotta money. And it wasn't worth it. I could have floated my Largillières just as well by having the journalists to dinner here and giving 'em a good cigar and as much champagne as they could carry! That would have been every bit as effective."

"What on earth is a Largillière, Mr. Falkenheim?" Margot asked.

"Come with me, my dear," replied Israel, "and I'll

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show you." He gave her his cold, bony hand, helping her to rise from among the cushions of her armchair, where she lay like some exquisite doll, bewilderingly pretty, her frock of violet-blue charmeuse vivid against the light chintz. He led her with tottering footsteps across the slippery parquet floor to where an electric light switch was fixed in the wall behind the black Steinway grand, polished and gleaming. The turning on of the switch suffused all the pictures on the wall with an even radiance, by a contrivance in the frames. "That's a Largillière, just in front of you," said Israel, pointing to the portrait of a middle-aged beauty of the reign of Louis XIV. The other pictures were mostly by the less-known French painters of the latter half of the eighteenth century; a collection of its kind almost unsurpassed by any in London with the exception of the one at Hertford House. All the charm and finesse of Parisian life in the last days before the Revolution were evoked by these intimate and frivolous "boudoir" scenes; these "Offres Séduisantes" and "Repentirs Tardifs"; these portraits of elegant and arch beauties in adorable frocks—by such painters as Moreau le jeune, Gabriel St. Aubin, Roslin, Levreince, and Baudouin. Israel had also two of Chardin's more domestic interiors, which he showed to Margot with pride. He confessed to a dislike of indifferent Fêtes Galantes. He didn't want any bad Paters or poor imitations of Lancret in his house—though he didn't mind selling them if fools wanted to buy them. He liked the men and women of these Louis XV painters more than their gods and goddesses, or masqueraders! Margot was amazed to find this ugly old man showing almost as technical a knowledge of frocks and fabrics and of the thousand-and-one adjuncts to feminine beauty on which the French painters of the eighteenth century

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lavished so much of their attention, as any professional *couturier* could possess.

"Fashion is a curious thing," said Israel reflectively. "With the exception of that *gouache* by Lavreince which I bought at the Muhlbacher sale fifteen years ago and had to pay a lot for, I bought nearly all of these, and some others as well, for a mere song, from Lord Dawlish. His ancestor, who was an Ambassador in Paris about one hundred and thirty years ago, had made the collection. The present peer is a temperance reformer, you know, and very sanctimonious, so he was glad to get rid of them. He never forgave me, however, when he saw the price at which I re-sold the poorest of the Largillières—after the boom. . . ." The old man chuckled at the recollection of past triumphs in which he took almost as much æsthetic pleasure as in the works of art themselves.

"So despised 'society' did that for you?" Margot observed with a touch of acid in her tone. She suspected a "sour grapes" element in Israel's contempt for her deities.

"Oh, yes," he admitted. "The world is full of fools. Besides, my dear, I went in for it rather thoroughly. I didn't only get the two or three countesses you always see advertised, who've been such a drug on the market for the past twenty years. Those sort of women don't really matter. They would put their husbands on the board of any company that ever was floated—for a consideration, and the consideration gets less every year. Oh, no! I got quite a good duke who knew very nearly as much about *Ming* as I know myself; and several of the untitled people, who are so much more important still."

"How can they be more important if they haven't got titles?" asked Margot naïvely.

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"My dear," laughed Israel, "I can see you have a lot to learn—but don't be in a hurry to learn it all too quickly," he said, patting her hand. "You know, there's six months yet," he whispered with clumsy humour as they resumed their places at the feet of Mrs. Falkenheim. That massive and good-natured woman, during their examination of the pictures, had apparently been ruminating on the subject of dances to which she could take Margot. She had rung the bell, and the elderly butler, whom Israel had also acquired from Lord Dawlish, made a noiseless entry. His melancholy face and bent shoulders expressed a weary resignation.

. . ."Fraser," said Mrs. Falkenheim. "Fetch me the *Times* for last Monday." She fixed her gold-rimmed pince-nez on a nose in every way adequate for their support, and, taking the paper from the servant's hands, began slowly to read through the list of dances. Rather more than half of them she ticked off with a pencil. "Mrs. Condoe Aaronson at the Ritz, June fourth. That's Jim Aaronson's wife. How she is getting on, that woman! You can see to that, can't you, Israel? Then Lady Barchester on the sixth"—husband and wife exchanged a look of comprehension over Lady Barchester; there were reasons why she should be accommodating—"and Mrs. Frank Hattersley at Surrey House on the eighth. . . ."

To Margot's great delight it seemed that they were going to find her dances for every other night during the next two months. She reflected that she would have to break deeply into her nest-egg, for clothes. One ball frock would not go very far, lovely though it was. Her experiences in Paris acting on her highly trained intelligence had already taught her a great deal about what should be worn in London, and in this respect at least

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she was already far in advance of the average English girl of her age.

Mrs. Falkenheim, having completed her study of the social arrangements announced in the *Times*, gathered up her embroidery, putting it back into a large cardboard box covered with a pattern of red and blue roses, and prepared for bed.

Margot walked to the open window for a moment, before accompanying her. She stepped out on to the balcony which was fringed with long boxes of geraniums, whose scent rose up into the warm evening air. On either side stretched the impressive expanse of Richbourne Terrace—tall houses, brightly lighted, standing back on either side behind a row of trees. The throbbing beat of the waltzes and rags now came quite distinctly to her ears. She could almost look into the nearer of the ballrooms from which the music was issuing. It was in a house on the opposite side of the terrace, and through the trees she could see couples revolving around the richly lighted room and others coming out on to the balcony and fanning themselves. A strip of red carpet was laid from the front door of the house, across the pavement to the road, and people seemed to be arriving continuously. Apparently in London the guests started out to dances at eleven o'clock, and this thrilled her with the triumphant realisation that she was no longer in "the provinces," or—worse still—"the Colonies." She was in the very hub of the social world. To think of it!

Over her head the dark blue sky was a blaze of stars; the air seemed to thrill with suggestions of brilliance and excitement, with the electricity of early summer. And above the noise of the violins and the hum and throb of the motors hurrying up and down the road there came to her ears a deep, continuous, but distant roar like the roar

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of the sea—the sound of London's mighty heart-beats. She stood silent and thrilled, but like Louise in the opera, she could have thrown wide her arms and shouted out, "London, London!" as if apostrophising some god to whom she was offering her body as a sacrifice and her soul as a possession. A shooting star swept across the heavens as she looked upwards, dying in a swift blaze of glory, and she wondered whether this could be an omen.

She turned and saw that her hostess was watching her with eyes dewy and full of kindliness, and re-entered the drawing-room to say good-night to Israel before giving her arm for Mrs. Falkenheim to lean upon. When they were parting for the night on the landing above, and after Mrs. Falkenheim had expressed the wish that Margot had everything she wanted, the girl suddenly put her arms around the old woman's neck and kissed her on both cheeks. "I guess you're the greatest dear that ever lived!" she cried with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. This embrace made Mrs. Falkenheim feel still more emotional, and a spasm of affection for the motherless beauty whom she had taken under her wing shot through her, as she went into her room.

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CHAPTER V

ONE of the first things which Margot did on her arrival in London was to send a note to Rachel Elkington asking her to come to tea. She wrote the letter in her room early one morning, after she had drunk her first cup of tea and the black silk curtains had been drawn to let in a ray of sunlight as joyous as her own youth. She had jumped out of bed and run in her nightgown to throw the window wide open, to look at the fresh greenery of the trees in the terrace, at the blue sky overhead—at London. She *had* to be up and doing, though she was really a little ashamed to find that her childhood habits of early rising were so ingrained. To avoid making a premature descent to the bath-room she sat writing letters, the first to Rachel Elkington, the second to her "friends in England," the Hendersons. Although Adam Henderson really existed, she had not seen him for such a long time that he was now largely an unknown quantity. Two years ago, not long after the wonder-week with Jacky Bruce which marked the beginning of her sentimental experience, she had been wooed by this young clergyman, who had come out to see if he had a vocation for pastoral work in the far Northwest. He had stopped in Montreal on his return journey to England (not finding the far Northwest much to his liking) and had fallen in with Margot, who encouraged him because he had the same respect for her "innocence" which had been shown by Jacky. Adam Henderson, however, was a Scotsman of a type not unlike her own father. He took the grocery store into consideration when engaged in his

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wooing, weighed the pros and cons, and finally—though overflowing with sentimentality—omitted to propose. He couldn't leave it at that, however, but, with a not uncommon form of masculine vanity, thought he would soften the blow to Margot by bestowing his friendship on her and writing her long, semi-improving letters. Less than a year ago he had written to tell her of his marriage and how he and his wife had started a school in Dorset for backward and delicate children. Margot was not wrong in concluding, from this piece of information, that the wife "had money." "Trust Adam for that!" she reflected. He ended his letter with the fervently expressed hope that if ever Margot came to England she would make their house her home. Mrs. Henderson, he added, would be delighted to meet her.

It was a cordial effusion, but Margot knew her man; heard him telling his rich wife about a nice little girl, "not quite our kind," whom he had "treated rather shabbily out in Montreal, and nearly got entangled with!" Very well, *she* would do the patronising before they had finished. Meanwhile, Adam might come in extremely useful—one never knew! She wrote him a guarded letter on Mr. Falkenheim's heavy and opulent-looking white note-paper, telling him of her arrival in London; how she would probably be "fearfully rushed during the season, but would much like to run down to Dorsetshire for a long week-end to make his wife's acquaintance and to see him again." "Two can play at getting on in the world!" she reflected as she stuck down the envelope. No subsequent success ever gave her quite the same amount of satisfaction as the writing of that letter. . . .

She went out after breakfast for a walk in Kensington Gardens till Mrs. Falkenheim was ready to go out in the

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car, and it was not till she had actually posted her two letters that it occured to her, in a flash, that Adam Henderson might give her away. She weighed the advantages and the disadvantages of telling him about her arrival in England. A presentable "old friend" might be extremely useful; on the other hand, he might upset matters at a critical moment. On the whole, she thought she had done rightly, and that after she had seen him she would be able to rely on his discretion and on his help. "And if he simply *dared* do me in," she muttered, concluding the matter, "I'd shoot the little blighter!" Her eyes blazed as she came to this decision. She had just entered the Park through the gate by the ornamental waterworks which bring the Serpentine to an end.

"My dearest girl!" said a gentle, familiar voice. "Whose murder are you plotting, pray? And why didn't you tell me you had arrived in London?"

Margot looked up to see Rachel Elkington standing in front of her, with a lovely Borzoi on a leash.

"Why, Rachel, this is bully!" she cried. "I'd just written to you to ask you to come to tea with us to-morrow. I've only been here two days, and I've hardly seen anything of London yet. Say, it isn't really a patch on Paris—is it?—except for the nobs' houses!"

Rachel went into a little peal of laughter at this admission. "You enchanting child," she said, "you'll carry the place by storm if only you stay as you are!"

Margot suspected latent sarcasm, and grew pink. "You will come to see us to-morrow, won't you?" she said to change the subject. "Mr. Falkenheim will enjoy showing off his pictures to you."

"Yes, dearest," said Rachel, with obvious pleasure. "I shall be delighted to come!" Margot felt a glow of satisfaction to see that, after all, the Falkenheims, if only

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for their belongings—in spite of their being Jews and of their living in the now suspect Bayswater—could arouse this enthusiasm on Rachel's part. Rachel had the most ingenuous face. You could always tell when she meant what she said, and it was clear that her expressions of pleasure at renewing her slight acquaintance with the Falkenheims were quite genuine.

The two friends walked slowly round the Serpentine towards the bridge, busy taking up their friendship where they had left it off in Paris. Rachel, as before, was the one who made the advances, and Margot was almost embarrassed by her affection. In Montreal she had never had a real girl friend. The other girls at Madame Valloton's were French, and she had never been intimate with any of them. As for her Price Street cronies, they merely observed an armed neutrality, and were ready to scratch one another's eyes out on the slightest provocation. But Rachel seemed really to like her, to admire her looks, to wish her well. "You are a lovely creature, Margot," she said in an access of enthusiasm as they stood still for a moment to watch a long line of ducks sail toward them, one behind the other, like tiny battleships. "You will turn the heads of half London before you have been here a week!"

"Oh, but I'm such a country cousin," replied Margot. "I've got such heaps to learn. I expect you'll often laugh at me yourself!"

"Darling," cried Rachel, with horrified eyes. "Please don't say that. Why, you'd be done for if you learnt things—completely spoiled! For heaven's sake, don't get refined! I'm dreadfully refined, and so are half the unmarried girls in London. You are like a wild rose compared with us!"

The sun was very warm for an instant on the back

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of Margot's neck and down her spine. She felt as if she were surrounded by masses of fragrant rose-leaves. Oh, London was just Heaven, and Rachel was one of the angels. Of course, she was going to be a success! A thrill of insolent youth ran through her veins, the china-blue of her eyes became softened and deeper, her colour a thought more glowing. Some little wisps of blonde hair escaped from under her dark hat, and as she stood with red, moist lips parted in a smile, she looked to Rachel like some Greek nymph dressed in Paris fashions —too radiant to be real.

"I *do* want to be married, Rachel," Margot said in one of her flashes of eagerness. "I want to marry a rich gentleman and live in London for ever and ever!"

Rachel grew faintly pink for reasons which Margot was unable to diagnose, and then smiled at her friend with an affection that was half-maternal. "My dear," she said, "whoever he is, he won't be worthy of you!"

"Oh, I'm ambitious enough!" said Margot. "You mustn't encourage me."

"I didn't mean to," said Rachel earnestly. "I only wanted to hint that 'all isn't gold that glitters,' and you are worthy of the *true* gold."

"Yes," Margot agreed, lost in a day-dream, "and diamonds too!"

Rachel reflected in silence, for a few moments, that perhaps just a *little* refinement might be good for her dear one. If Margot could only meet some really nice men and women and learn the way they looked at things, she would eventually be so much happier. Petrouschka, the Borzoi, put up his long, white head with its cold, black nose and looked at her with eyes of impenetrable wisdom—the very incarnation of distinguished refinement. Petrouschka never even nodded to terriers, pugs,

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"poms" or creatures of that kind. His wintry eyes did not seem aware of their existence. Well, well, refinement is all very good in its place, and that's under the surface. Her dearest Margot had as much refinement as anybody in her beloved heart, she was convinced of it. It only needed the companionship of nice people to bring it out. She must collect some for her to meet; it would give her an amusement, something to think about!

"You must try to keep a free evening to come and dine with us," Rachel said, "and we could go somewhere and dance afterwards. I feel sure Mrs. Falkenheim would look on me as an efficient chaperon; I've got that kind of face!"

Margot thanked her friend effusively and intimated that there was nothing she would enjoy more.

"I tell you who I'll ask to meet you," Rachel went on, "and that's Godfrey Levett, the man who wrote the play that's on now at the 'First Avenue.' You remember meeting him in Paris, don't you?"

Margot replied that she remembered him well, and mentioned how he came to dine with the Falkenheims on their last evening at the "Capitol."

"And didn't you think him a dear?" Rachel enquired enthusiastically. "He is quite unlike most other men. His points of view are so different."

Margot replied guardedly to the effect that she had never had more than a few minutes' consecutive conversation with him, but would much like to meet him again; and wasn't the world a small place, anyway? "Now I must beat it, Rachel," she added. "I've got to go out with Mrs. Falkenheim."

"Well, we must certainly arrange something, dearest," Rachel remarked as they stood for a moment outside Lancaster Gate before parting. "He is one of the best

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dancers in London when he's in the mood, and he'll keep you amused during dinner. I'll have a talk to mother and bring you a choice of days at tea-time to-morrow."

Having thus offered up her favourite man on the altar of friendship, Rachel smiled on Margot with a rather hungry smile of maternal affection, and led Petrouschka back towards Hyde Park Street.

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CHAPTER VI

MARGOT was taken to her first dance by Mrs. Falkenheim on the following evening. "Some friends of ours in Portland Place are giving a little informal dance for their daughter," she explained, "and I expect you'll meet some partners there whom you will like to take about with you later on. It is a pity you don't know a few men, my dear. It is really necessary nowadays for a girl to bring her own men with her to a dance." Margot was secretly delighted to make her trial trip at something "quite small." (It did not occur to her to give her hostess any credit for stage management.) Rachel, who had come to tea that afternoon and had charmed the old couple, insisted on staying to help Margot to dress. She seemed almost as excited at her friend's *début* as if it were her own. Even Margot's violent distrust of her own sex faded in the warmth of affection which came from Rachel's honest eyes, and she felt no temptation to try to conceal her inexperience.

"You know, I just can't *imagine* what a London dance is like," she said, as Rachel brushed out her bright gold hair. "I don't even know if I can dance the way you do! So I shall just *have* to look all right." Margot was on the point of insisting on wearing the Doucet frock which Mrs. Falkenheim had given her—in spite of the combined remonstrances of Mrs. Falkenheim and Rachel, and her own appreciation of the folly of wasting it on anything "small." It seemed so tremendously important that she should make a success, attract attention from the very first! Rachel, suspecting this yearn-

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ing, remarked once more on what a pity it would be to wear an exclusive model—which all the women would notice—at a dance of no particular importance in a private house.

Margot contrived to pick up as many hints as possible from Rachel. She learnt from her that there would probably be no programmes, and that if there was a crush her men might have some difficulty in finding her and even in recognising her. "Don't be too hard on them, darling," said Rachel. "I mean if the man you ought to dance with hangs about, obviously unable to remember if it's you he's dancing with or the lovely dark girl standing by your side, swallow your mortification and don't deliberately look at him as if you'd never seen such an object in your life before. Heaps of girls do that; it's so silly. They miss ever so many dances by it, too." Rachel poured out a gentle stream of good advice, mingled with exclamations of ecstatic admiration, as she fixed a flower in Margot's dress, instructed the maid to make some minute alteration, or arranged the ornaments in her hair. "My darling, you're simply *too* divine!" she said, kissing her lightly on the lips. "You'll have a *succès fou*. I shall ring you up in the morning, about luncheon time, and ask you all about it. . . . Now I must fly."

A few minutes after Rachel had gone—with her self-confidence at its most serene—Margot went downstairs to dinner, only to be complimented afresh by Mrs. Falkenheim and by Israel.

The dance was given by some friends of Israel's, the Fawsett Vivians. Mr. Reginald Fawsett Vivian—who for all his high-sounding name and expensive English education was much nearer to Frankfort-on-the-Main than Mr. Falkenheim—was a pillar of the Stock Ex-

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change. His wife—an imposing peroxide blonde, dark under the eyes as though she were imperfectly bathed, but with a certain social volubility and aplomb—was supposed to go in for "authors and artists, and people of that sort." Indeed, she fully realised that to have her ballroom sprinkled with celebrities and her house beautifully decorated were important social assets. She strove pathetically to be interesting. It was her tragedy that no one could be induced to think of her as anything but rich.

Israel did not put in an appearance at the dance, and Mrs. Falkenheim and her *protégée* went there alone in the heavy, brightly-lighted car. They reached the Fawsett Vivians' house soon after half-past ten. A very few early couples were already in the room, but dancing had not yet begun. As Margot walked up the broad staircase by the side of Mrs. Falkenheim—she was dressed in a frock of pale green moiré with a waistband of cherry-coloured velvet, and wore her hair bound in a glittering fillet and adorned with an aigrette which seemed to symbolise determination—she remembered the lines of a song in *Véronique*, which she had once heard at Toronto:

"While I'm waiting
My heart is palpitating!"

It was not the palpitation of nervousness, but a trembling, almost like that of a lover, at the achievement of what had been so long desired. She noticed that Mrs. Fawsett Vivian "My dear'd" Mrs. Falkenheim very effusively as they shook hands at the head of the stairs, and that her "good fairy" was received as a person of importance. This was satisfactory to Margot, who was

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impressed by the crowd's estimate of values. As she stood just inside the doorway of Mrs. Vivian's vast drawing-room—while Mrs. Falkenheim, placid and as much amused at everything as a child or a very plump kitten, looked round for suitable young men—Margot examined the room with what was meant to be the professional eye of the adventuress, but was really much more like that of Cinderella at the Prince's party. The band was her chief disappointment. It consisted of three dirty little men with banjos, who were probably niggers, and hadn't shaved at that, and a coffee-coloured horror at the piano, who looked as if he'd just escaped from a Yankee gaol. You would expect to see a band like that in a back street out at home. They were downright low, she called them. She sighed for the Pink Viennese "bowered in palms" of whom she had always read, and was glad she had not insisted on wearing her Doucet frock. A young man without any distinctive feature of any kind whatever was introduced to her by Mrs. Falkenheim, and asked her to dance. He bostoned with a wooden precision, asked her if she'd been to Hurlingham that afternoon, discovered that she was a French-Canadian, and remarked that that was "awfully jolly." Mrs. Falkenheim stopped her in the middle of the dance to introduce another man, whom the motherly old woman evidently considered of importance. Margot observed him while they bowed; already she had noted his air of lazy magnificence, and had been irritated by it. Captain Vernon Stokes—for that was the name of the exquisite—had a lovely face and a poor figure. The skin on his forehead was beautifully bronzed, his cheeks were red, and he had even white teeth. His hair was a darkish brown, and he had a neat brown "toothbrush" moustache. Though tall, however, he was not well-proportioned, and

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any female connoisseur of the masculine form would have found much in his appearance to criticise. Rachel referred to him subsequently as "a typical flapper's hero," and even to Margot's unsophisticated eye every gesture revealed the fact that he was "eaten up." The part Margot liked best about him was the shape of his head, which seemed to her distinguished. Otherwise, he was the image of a fashionable riding-master at Montreal, who had once tried to kiss her in the shop at Price Street. Margot realised, when Adonis first looked at her through half-closed, sleepy eyes, then opened them, smiled, and asked her for the next dance but one, that the *œillade* had been intended to work havoc. She gave him the dance willingly; but her blood was up, and as she continued bostoning with her partner she prepared herself as if for a contest. While she was dancing she noticed on several occasions that the eyes of her hostess were fixed on her. Standing by Mrs. Vivian's side was an oldish man with a red beard, who leant heavily on a gold-headed malacca cane. Margot did not pay much attention to them, but when the music stopped Mrs. Fawsett Vivian came towards her across the room. The important-looking old man had evidently asked to be introduced. He was Sir Carl Frensen. Margot thrilled at the sound of the well-known name—the first celebrity whom she had met in the flesh—and as he bowed to her she gave him one of her sweetest smiles. He was certainly not beautiful to look at, but there was something about him that would have arrested attention anywhere. He had a large fat face, and pale gold hair very thin on top. His red beard was elaborately cared for and pointed in the style of Henri IV., and his reddish-brown eyes were surrounded by red rims. It was his eyes which made one notice him; they seemed to send little ripples

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of magnetism all over Margot as she looked into them. They were clever and wicked and cruel eyes—the eyes of a *vieux satyre* with a sense of humor.

"You must let me give you some supper later on, Miss Cartier, if you will," he asked her. "As you see, I am much too fat to dance!" Margot smiled at him. "I guess you'd better come and find me when it's supper-time," she drawled. "I don't rightly see how I'll know otherwise."

As Sir Carl moved away, Margot was amazed to see Mrs. Falkenheim staring at her from the other side of the room with an expression on her face of fear, annoyance—almost of horror. Margot could not understand what it could be that had upset her and shaken her out of her usual placid lethargy. . . .

The featureless youth was now getting impatient, and insisted on leading her to the balcony to cool. From the open window, by turning her back on the street, she could watch the room slowly emptying—the gleam of white shoulders, the flash of jewels, quiver of aigrettes, and the hot faces of men who had just stopped dancing. She noticed Sir Carl Frensen standing in the doorway chatting amiably to her hostess and to the "daughter," but she could not see Mrs. Falkenheim. . . .

Sir Carl, she thought, had a wonderful look of importance, but was obviously not a bit English. He didn't even talk English like the other Englishmen. Captain Stokes walked past in front of her as she was examining Sir Carl Frensen, accompanied by a dazzled *débutante* who was trying desperately to seem grown-up. The *débutante* had literary aspirations, it appeared.

"You must send me some of your things to look at; I write a little myself, you know. My hobby is observing my fellow men—and women," she heard Captain

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Stokes remark to the little creature by his side, who looked up at him with eyes wide open.

"Lord, he can tell the tale all right," she said to herself. "I shall have to look out for *him,* I can see!" And then she fell again to wondering why Mrs. Falkenheim had looked at her so strangely while Sir Carl Frensen was being introduced to her. Had she made some fearful "floater," or was Sir Carl no better than he should be? She looked about for Mrs. Falkenheim, and when she discovered her, went over to try to get the problem solved. But the old woman had relapsed into her habitual calm.

"Well, my dear," she said to Margot, greeting her in her usual fat and kindly voice, "you look lovely. I'm proud of you. I hope you are enjoying yourself! But I was sorry to see you talking to Sir Carl Frensen, dear. He is not the sort of man it will do you any good to see too much of. You can't be too careful. It was very stupid of Mrs. Vivian to introduce him without consulting me." Mrs. Falkenheim saw she was arousing Margot's interest, and stopped. "I should cut his dance if I were you," she added.

Captain Stokes came and claimed Margot for the next dance before she could reply. The unshaven "niggers" had already started one of the newest rags, and as they moved into the room Margot wondered what she should do when Sir Carl came to take her into supper. Surely it would be impossible to avoid him; besides, she knew now that she did not want to avoid him. Mrs. Falkenheim's words had scarcely produced the effect intended.

Like many Canadians, Margot excelled in the rag, and allowed Captain Stokes to initiate her into all sorts of "walks" and "trots" and other variations, which she knew backwards. From the halting but determined way

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in which the other girls in the room were attempting them, she realised that they must be the rage in London, and her self-confidence increased accordingly. From the respect which this "nut" had for her dancing, she realised in a flash that her Canadian background must be an asset. In some way it gave her *chic*. . . .

After the dance, Captain Stokes found her a comfortable chair in a secluded corner of an upper landing, and turned on his companion the combined radiance of his teeth and eyes and moustache. Margot was titillated by them to the full, but to an eye trained to pick out in an instant the customers who will pay and those who won't there was something vaguely irritating about him. He eyed her dreamily through long, beautiful lashes.

"By gad," he said, "if there's one thing you Americans do understand, it is dancing. We should still be doing Lancers and round waltzes if it hadn't been for you."

"If you are talking about me, I'm a Canadian, thank you," said Margot with dignity. Captain Stokes thought as much, and remarked, with one hand to his moustache, that it explained why she was so nice. "What do you think of *us?*" he went on.

Margot explained that she thought London was just lovely, but she hadn't been to many dances yet. Did she like London dances? "Not much. Everyone really looks rather bored, or else on the bink," she said, "in spite of the fact that they make such a pretence of enjoying themselves and get so sticky doing rags. It's the girls who look the most bored. And there seem to be a lot too many useless young men filling up the doorways."

"They look in for a little supper, late. It makes something to do, you know." This lofty patronage on the

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part of the *jeunesse dorée* was vividly reflected in Captain Stokes' own attitude. He seemed, indeed, half inclined to apologise for his presence at the Fawsett Vivians'.

"Englishmen always seem to think it's awfully good of them to come," Margot remarked acidly. "But I know if *I* gave a dance I'd take care to ask only men who had something *to* them. Not born-tireds, who lean up against doors."

"Oh, they aren't all asked, you know," said Stokes, laughing.

"Then I'd get a chucker-out," Margot retorted, "to assist the butler."

"*You* could, by George!" he said, with a quick flash of admiration.

"Well, I shouldn't ask *you,* anyway," snapped Margot. "Conceited ass," she whispered, under her breath. Her companion thoroughly annoyed her. The pink radiance of his cheeks became a little pinker at this unlooked-for taking down. He was a man who throughout the whole of his life had been flattered and fawned on by women—never snubbed. He regarded Margot with renewed attention. Why wouldn't she ask *him* to her parties? Was it merely a feminine wile to make him interested?

"Would you turn on the chucker-out if I came?" he asked with a smile.

Margot had recovered herself by this time. "It depends how you behaved!" she said laughingly. The music of the next dance had begun, and as they walked downstairs Margot was pleased to find her companion distinctly ruffled. Her instinct told her she had got in somewhere on the raw.

The first man she saw when she got back into the ballroom was Godfrey Levett, who appeared to be look-

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ing for her. "Are you dancing this one with anybody?" he asked. "I saw Mrs. Falkenheim just now, and she told me you were here." They began to boston under Stokes' curious eye. Margot was overjoyed to meet someone she had seen before, and treated Levett with unconscious warmth. He seemed like an old friend.

When the music stopped they found a quiet corner and compared notes. She was surprised at the change which had come over Levett. He looked tidy; his hair was brushed flat; he appeared to be enjoying himself. Somehow he was the very last person she would have expected to meet at her first London dance. She connected him with pictures, with learning, scholarship, "the intellect." She had imagined that people of his kind avoided society like the plague. But she was very glad he had come, and she could not help comparing him at once to the man with whom she had just been dancing. What a contrast they made! Stokes was the patronising man of the world, used to flattery, careful to impress on people his perspicacity and experience, and consequently the victim of anyone who chose to stab his vanity. Levett, however, allowed a diffident manner to conceal a humorous observation. Margot had felt, even in the picture shop, that by snubbing him she had only excited his gentle, mocking laughter.

"I suppose you go about a great deal," she remarked to him.

"Not me!" said Levett. "I'm much too busy; but I always enjoy myself hugely when I do, and I am a confirmed 'bitter-ender.' I love dancing."

Margot wondered which of the girls in the room had brought him.

"You can imagine it's exciting for me," she said, with an inspiration to be confiding. "This is my first dance

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in London, and I've never been to London before. But I expect Rachel Elkington told you that. I believe we are going to meet there at dinner one day soon."

Levett asked her if she wasn't disappointed with her first experience of London ballrooms. "While one is dancing with a good partner one is perfectly happy," he went on, "and of course supper is one of the most delicious episodes in human life. But if one sits out a dance in the room itself—it's depressing. All the performers are so professional. The people who give the dance stand about at the top of the stairs racked with anxiety or shivering with boredom. The girls, who come in droves, are most of them 'correct' to a point to make one scream. They go out night after night, enjoying themselves less and less. The only men they meet and like are the men they waste their time by dancing with, and who are bored stiff with them. What annoys me particularly about the young things," he continued, "is that they *will* drink soda-water with their supper, and want to hurry away before one has had a mouthful."

"I guess you're real greedy!" said Margot in a disapproving voice.

"Shocking!" Levett admitted. "I just *love* a well-cooked quail! I go to dances later and later in order to shorten the time of anxious waiting. I'm really no good at all without my quail. When you are a great London hostess, mind you remember that about me! Mr. Levett *must* have his quail!"

"What makes you think I shall ever be a great London hostess?" asked Margot.

"Somehow, I fancy that's what you'd like to be, isn't it?" said Levett.

"Yes."

"Well, I think people get what they want more often

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than not. What is so terribly difficult is to know precisely what one *does* want."

"Well, I've always known that," said Margot.

"Then you'll always continue to get it! I feel the first tremulous thrills of approaching supper," he went on. "We had better hurry down, so that the supreme moment may find us in a good strategic position."

"Well, I call you just a pig," said Margot, laughing. "Out in Montreal, when a gentleman is talking to a young lady, he does not think about supper at all!"

"Oh, then I expect the girl does!"

They parted thoroughly amused with one another. Margot followed him with her eyes and watched him go up to a girl—dressed in a very daring green frock—with black eyes and a dead-white, heavily-powdered face, and carry her off with him.

"He's got an affair with that woman," she said to herself; she divined it instinctively.

Well, now was the moment when she must decide whether she should cut Sir Carl Frensen to please Mrs. Falkenheim. She would have liked to please Mrs. Falkenheim, but if she did, who would take her into supper? She felt both hungry and thirsty. Sir Carl Frensen himself advanced at that instant across the floor, leaning on his heavy cane, his red eyes glittering, and settled the whole problem for her out of hand. Margot thought she had never before seen anyone of his age who looked so amused, so interested in life, so oddly expectant of some pleasant surprise which the future might have in store for him. He offered Margot his arm with mid-Victorian courtesy. "This is the moment to which we old men look forward," he said with a smile. "If we can't dance we can at least take a charming companion in to supper!"

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"I think the way you Englishmen talk about your suppers is perfectly disgusting," laughed Margot. "My partners seem to have been waiting for nothing else all the evening. . . ."

"That, of course, is sheer bad taste on their part. That anyone who could dance with you could look forward to doing anything else is unpardonable!"

They found a table in a far corner of the big panelled dining-room, on the walls of which, above the panelling, hung portraits by fashionable painters of Mr. and Mrs. Fawsett Vivian and their two daughters. Margot found herself absorbed by her "dangerous" companion and absolutely helpless. She felt like a baby in charge of a grown-up person. He could do whatever he liked with her; could ask her any number of personal questions, if it pleased him to do so, without her being able to make the faintest protest. How his red eyes seemed to bulge out of his face!

"So you've come to conquer London, Miss Cartier," he remarked, with a quick glance. "A reversal of Christopher Columbus's enterprise!"

"What makes you say that?"

"How do you think you will enjoy yourself, after you have got what you want?"

"I haven't got it yet."

"No, but you will get it."

"Yes. Another man assured me I should, too, a few minutes ago."

"Somehow you don't look to me as if you'd very easily be satisfied. You are too intelligent. Most of the people you see all around you haven't any intelligence or any enterprise either—and very few appreciations. Let me give you some champagne, and I recommend one of those quails—they look delicious! . . . I don't

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think you would ever be satisfied if you were to stay in the corner of the world you are looking at, you know!"

Margot looked round the supper-room, encountering, somewhat to her discomfiture, the angry and perturbed eye of Mrs. Falkenheim. It was the same look of anger and fear that she had noticed when Sir Carl was first introduced to her. Mrs. Falkenheim was supping at a table in the middle of the room with Fawsett Vivian and his wife and one or two other people. The smile she gave in reply to Margot's bright glance and nod was strained and wintry, and Margot looked hastily away in an effort to collect herself. At the other tables were a cheerful crowd of men and girls. Margot envied the girls their look of refinement and the chill touch of correctness which made their companions find them so tedious. But they were all so strange to her that she could not separate one group from another, or differentiate between the various contrasted types. At present, too, they had something of the magnificence of the unknown. She noticed that Captain Stokes was having supper with the silly little girl with the literary aspirations. He was distinctly "smart," she realised that: much smarter than Levett, for instance, who was probably quite poor and of no particular family. All the girls, except the Jewesses, seemed to have the same look of chilly, well-bred stupidity. There were a good many Jewesses; some looked clever and alert, others—fat, thick-lipped, and heavy with the boredom of neglect—were palpably rich. Even to Margot's inexperienced eye they were obviously on the market, matrimonially.

"No, they don't seem a very exciting lot, I must say," Margot replied, in answer to Sir Carl's comment. "But I would like to know who Captain Stokes is having supper with."

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"I think that's Ida Mertoun, the youngest of Lord Mertoun's daughters. Stokes is rather a *parti*, you know. His family manufactures something or other in Yorkshire. His father, Sir William Stokes, is very well-off, and that boy is the heir to the baronetcy."

Margot reflected, with feminine cattishness, that Ida wasn't such a fool as she looked. Little minx, with her literary aspirations!

"How did you like Stokes?" Sir Carl Frensen asked. "I saw you dancing with him earlier in the evening."

"I thought him a real dude and a lovely dancer, and just about eaten up with airs! If you ask me, I think he wants putting through the hoop a bit. . . ."

Sir Carl laughed immoderately at her criticism. "You ought to experiment on him, for his own good! I'm sure it would work miracles."

"I did take him down a bit, as it was," Margot confessed. "I don't expect he'll ask me for any more dances this evening."

"Ah, *nous verrons!*" said Sir Carl. "Nature is a devious lady—her hobby is to attract by repulsion, and she adores the conjunction of opposites. I shan't stay to watch if my prediction is verified, as I always go to bed after supper. But you must tell me all about it the next time we meet. . . ."

Margot felt inclined to say, "When will that be?" she was so excited at the thought of the interest in her which his remark seemed to suggest, but she remembered herself in time. The old man's red eyes covered her with a look which made her feel uneasy, as though he were mentally taking off all her clothes, garment by garment, and peering also into all the secret places of her heart. He unnerved her with his impression of strength. If he hadn't been Sir Carl Frensen, and if she had been

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left to herself instead of having been warned against him, she would have avoided him as a regular old beast. As it was, thanks in part to Mrs. Falkenheim, she realised how greatly he interested her, and how disappointed she would be if she never met him again. The vivid excitement of her first dance endowed him, and indeed all her partners, with a peculiar glamour.

Mrs. Falkenheim, like Sir Carl, was always glad to think of bed when supper was over, but she stayed on while Margot danced again with Godfrey Levett and with one or two other men whom Mrs. Fawsett Vivian had introduced to her. When Margot rejoined her she said, with a certain coldness of tone:

"Now, Margot I think we'll be going home. You will only be over-tired in the morning if we stay any longer." Margot was on the point of begging for a few more dances when to her surprise and elation Captain Stokes came up to her, beaming, "Well," he said, with his easy confidence, "are you going to give me another dance?"

She looked at him calmly and smiled back. "I'm afraid we are just going, so it is impossible." Mrs. Falkenheim glanced at her *protégée,* but noticing the look on Margot's face she said nothing, and Stokes shook hands with them stiffly.

* * * * *

"Don't you like Captain Stokes, dear?" Mrs. Falkenheim asked in the car as they drove home. "I would gladly have waited while you had that dance with him!"

"Oh, yes, I thought he was rather nice," said Margot; "but I was quite ready for bed. I *have* enjoyed it so much! And I do hope I was all right. Was I?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Falkenheim, "you were ever so much the prettiest girl in the room, and you know it! You were a *great* success. The only thing that disap-

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pointed me was to see you having supper with Sir Carl Frensen. I do so hope—for your sake, particularly, Margot—that you will never see him again. . . ."

* * * * *

Margot was not too tired before going to sleep to turn to the blue peerage which stood, with the Red Book, Bradshaw, and various other works of reference, on her bedroom writing table. She looked up first Sir Carl Frensen, then Captain Stokes.

"Frensen," she read. "Carl Frensen, 1st Bt. (1899). Head of the banking house of Frensen Brothers. Son of the late Hermann Frensen of Stockholm." She discovered from the book that he had been twice married, that he had a villa at Cap Martin, an estate in Argyllshire, a house in Belgrave Square, a flat in Paris in the Avenue Hoche, and that he had no children. So he was only some sort of foreign banker after all, and probably a Jew as well! She had suspected as much, but the discovery, in view of her developed social ambitions, came as a disappointment. Captain Stokes, however, restored her equanimity. "Stokes, Bart. Sir William Stokes, 1st Bt. (U.K. 1890), D.L., late an M.P." That was his father. There was no reference to any business. His mother was "elder daughter of Major-General Edward Marmaduke Cornewall, C.B., of Corshom House, Clevedon, Somerset." He was educated at Eton and Sandhurst, was a Captain in a Guards regiment, thirty years old and unmarried!

In spite of the hour, it was some time before Margot fell asleep, so highly-strung were her nerves after the most exciting experience in her whole life. At last she sank into a heavy but uneasy slumber, in which constant dream-visions passed before her eyes. Always she saw the gleam of white teeth, and the same dark moustache

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and soulless, hazel eyes; always she was in the company of Vernon Stokes, and every time she loathed him more. Through the mists of her dream sometimes the red eyes of Sir Carl Frensen would appear, observing her; sometimes the suspicious, cold-black eyes of Israel Falkenheim. At last she tried to escape from Stokes; they were together at a dance which seemed to go on for ever and ever and ever. She was just rushing in desperation to the balcony to throw herself into the street when, with a start, she woke, to discover that Marie had brought her morning coffee.

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CHAPTER VII

RACHEL ELKINGTON was sitting one Sunday morning —about a fortnight after the Fawsett Vivians' dance— in her big music-room at the top of the house in Hyde Park Street when the idea came to her to ring up Godfrey Levett. Her mother was going out to a luncheon party to which she also had been invited, but through laziness she had made some excuse not to accept. It was overpoweringly hot outside, deliciously cool in her long, low room, with its wide open windows, its bowls of white flowers, its dark green carpet and hangings and dark furniture. Through the windows and beyond the window-boxes full of white azaleas she could see the deep blue of the June sky. The thrum of cars coming back from the Park in time for their occupants to get ready for luncheon came gently to her ears, making her feel more than ever lazy. She took up the telephone receiver and rang up Levett's little house in Holland Street. He was on the point of going out, but she caught him in the hall.

"I was just going to walk off a dance headache before luncheon," he remarked. She suggested that he should make his walk through Kensington Gardens and come and share her lonely meal. "My headache has already half gone at the thought of it!" he replied. "I shall be with you in less than an hour. I couldn't possibly have thought of anything more delightful; we'll gossip the whole afternoon and be thoroughly lazy!"

The Elkingtons' house in Hyde Park Street was one of Levett's most cherished haunts. Everything about it

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pleased him, and every added year of his intimacy with it lent it a new charm. He would have been horribly shocked if for any reason the mother and daughter had left their house for another, had migrated to Mayfair or gone over to the "right" side of the Park. If Mrs. Elkington had changed her butler, he would have felt it far more than the loss of one of his own servants. George had always been there; he had been Major Elkington's servant in the army thirty years ago, and on his master's retirement from the service had become his body-servant and subsequently his butler. When the Major died suddenly of heart disease, George had continued as a kind of family house-dog, guarding the relict and her daughter as if they had been confided to his safekeeping by word of command. His rather jealous devotion and his well-bred impertinences of the old servant delighted Levett and lent the house part of its atmosphere of permanence, of being remote from time and change.

All the furniture of the house was restful, and there were a great number of beautiful things in it. Like many soldiers, particularly of the older generation, Rachel's father had been something of a collector, and had loved beautiful embroideries, rare old Persian rugs, seventeenth-century Dutch pictures, and heavy, carved Indian silver. There were some good pictures in the house, of the kind that become dearer through familiarity. A lovely Cuyp—some cattle in the foreground, in the middle distance a church with some houses grouped around it and behind, one of his misty golden sunsets—hung in an eighteenth-century gilded frame over the black oak sideboard in the dining-room. It made the idea of luncheon delicious, that Cuyp. It was nice to walk across the Park thinking about it. On the white distempered walls,

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above the black oak panelling, hung two Hobbemas—landscapes in the grand manner, all dark greens and romance. The Hobbemas hung rather incongruously, on either side of an Elkington lady, by Kneller, whose style of beauty has not yet, luckily, returned to favour. Her high bosom and protuberant eyes resembled so many other Kneller portraits that Rachel had adduced the theory that the painter could only do one "pattern" of female, and that, as he was fashionable, his sitters were only too willing to comply. Hence this libellous "Rachel Elkington" of two centuries back! The jokes about the Kneller portrait, the cool dark greens of the Hobbemas, the golden Cuyp: how all these things seemed to blend together—with the old silver, the gleaming napkins and tablecloth, the odd-shaped knives and forks, the peculiarity that all the knives were little ones, and the ever-present flowers—to make this dining-room delightful!

"My dear Rachel," he said when he was shown into her room, "I've been thinking about you all the way across the Park. Yours is the only house I know that's cool as a well in summer and cosy in the winter, and restful all the time!" He bent down to drink in the odour of the white roses which stood on the chimney-piece in a great silver bowl. "How lovely they are—aren't they?" Rachel was sitting at the piano, where she had been trying over some new music before his arrival. She looked up at him and smiled. "You are an odd creature, Godfrey," she said. "I do wish I understood you! Where have you been dancing?"

"The Fannings. Betty sent me a card."

"Where was it?"

"Ritz. Fearful squash, too. Your friend, the blonde Canadian, was very much there. Also Stokes in attendance."

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"Do you know, Godfrey, I simply can't tolerate that man!" said Rachel with a burst of almost jealous irritation. "I don't know why it is, but I always want to be rude to him! There is a type of heavily smart young soldier that gets my dander up. It did father's, too! He couldn't bear their particular brand of fashionable ill-manners."

"Stokes isn't a bad fellow underneath, Rachel," Levett protested. "His conceit makes him extra-sensitive to what people think about him, that is all. But who wouldn't be conceited who was as handsome and as satisfactorily placed as he is?"

"Oh, well, I dare say I misjudge him!" Rachel replied. "It's a woman's privilege to be unjust and to rely on intuitions. What annoys me about him is his doctrine that the exquisite should always be as rude as possible. There is something subtly vulgar in the way he is always emphasising his superiority to the 'suburbs.' One would think it was because he detected a large streak of them in himself!"

"He has met his match in Miss Cartier, anyway!" laughed Godfrey. Luncheon was announced, and they went downstairs into the dining-room, and the discussion of Margot was postponed until they returned to the music-room to smoke. It was Rachel who re-opened it. "Tell me, Godfrey," she said seriously, "do you like Margot, and what do you make of her?"

Levett reflected before replying, and rested his hand for a moment on the white neck of Petrouschka, who had risen from the hearthrug, yawned, stretched himself and walked over to him to be made a fuss of.

"She simply isn't born yet," he said at last. "In her own way she is as lovely as Petrouschka is in his, but she has far less soul. She is rather foolishly selfish, and

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has a febrile determination to rise socially, which is tiresome. At present she is mixed up with a 'smart' crowd whom some of us consider the last word in emptiness and vulgarity. And I should say she has already begun to look down on the Falkenheims, who are simple, kindly people who've really got something in them. And she's lovely—one of the loveliest young women in London to-day. So there you are!"

"I think you are much too severe," said Rachel, up in arms for her friend. "You don't realise what a little simpleton she is at heart, for all her sophisticated airs. She is ever so fresh from some Canadian town or other, and between you and me I don't think she had ever known much about luxury or even ordinary comfort until a month or two ago. It's all so new, it's like a fairy tale to her; and the darling tries ever so hard to conceal how unfamiliar it all is!"

"You should see the way she manages Stokes," Levett remarked. "Not much fairy-tale about that. She's too knowing for words. She simply loathes him; anybody with half an eye can see it. On the whole that's rather interesting of her: the dawn of character! But then that is what I admire so much about her. She has plenty of character—or will have before she stops growing; and character is all that matters nowadays. Goodness and badness is only a question of the fashions. The goodness of yesterday is the badness of to-day, and *vice versa*. But character is different. That is always the valuable part of everybody, and it will be the saving of Margot Cartier—you see! There is no damned merit about her, and I should guess that she is entirely devoid of any moral sense—but she is burning with the fire of life, or else I'm blind!"

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"What sort of a woman do you think she will become?" Rachel asked.

"Who can tell? A rich man's wife to start with, unless she makes some hideous blunder. After that—who knows? It depends partly on the kind of rich man she catches, partly on the friends she makes, and on the interests, if any, which she develops. You and I know how deadly uninteresting the set of people are who do the whole social treadmill and advertise the fact in the newspapers. It is principally composed of an unholy alliance between the *déclassés* and the *parvenus*! One doesn't know which sort is the more tedious."

"Oh! the *déclassés!*" said Rachel. "They make one sick, and they become far more vulgar than the merely rich. There is always hope that newly rich people may be intelligent, and they often have plenty of character. They are alive, too, and healthy; they don't give that terrible effect of mental disease which their toadies do. The 'society' *déclassé* is always on the look-out for 'motives' behind people's civility or hospitality, always obsessed with the idea that the people he meets are 'anxious to know him,' or are scheming to be taken to tea with his aunts!"

"Well, anyway," said Godfrey, "your Margot has joined the great army of climbers-up and wormers-in; she hasn't discovered yet that her very efforts impair her chances of success. But, as she has an active mind and plenty of intelligence, and, above all, plenty of *character,* she will wake up one day and realise the rottenness of the whole business."

"It's awful, Godfrey," said Rachel earnestly, "this social blight. Do you know, I never thought of these things at all until I met Margot. The poor darling seems to

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have positively poisoned the atmosphere with her social valuations. . . ."

"Well, I hope she won't begin to kick away her ladders too soon, for *her* sake," Godfrey observed. "I have a sort of feeling, though, that she will soon begin to sneer at the Falkenheims because they are Jews and live in Bayswater. If Israel had bought a title instead of collecting pictures, and lived in a box in Mayfair, of course she would forgive him!"

"One thing is evident, Godfrey, at all events," said Rachel. "Margot has succeeded in interesting *you*! You wouldn't begin to get on your hind legs, my dear, like a Park orator, otherwise."

"Oh, she interests me right enough," Godfrey admitted. "After all, I'm only carnal man, and she is a goddess—to look at. Of course she interests me!"

Rachel blushed faintly. "Well, can't we do anything? I see her often. I'm ever so fond of her. I've never been so fond of any woman before. I try my hardest to interest her in the things that are worth having in life, but she subordinates everything to this terrible getting-on."

"Try her with a change of snobbism," suggested Godfrey, "like a new diet. Hint tactfully that all *really* 'nutty' people go every night to my plays, read improving novels, and have a passion for Russian music and Post-Impressionism. You know the sort of thing I mean! Perhaps it may succeed. After all, better an artistic snobbinette than one whose only literature is Burke's Peerage."

"Not a bit of it," said Rachel decisively. "I don't believe that, nor do you. Those things, though we laugh at them, in order not to get on mental stilts, mean something to both of us. No, Margot's only chance, as

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I told her a fortnight ago, is just to be her own dear self. If she tried to become 'refined' she would be done for. Of all forms of snobbism an insincere interest in the arts is the most insufferable. . . ."

"She might eventually develop a genuine interest in art," said Levett, "if she gave herself a chance. Books, pictures, music, after all, are acquired tastes, largely."

Rachel vividly agreed. "Why, yes, she might. But all I meant was, don't, for Heaven's sake, let her like them just because she fancies it *smart!*" Rachel shook herself, as though she had been examining something physically repulsive, and began playing the second movement of Beethoven's "Pathetic Sonata" to disinfect the conversational atmosphere.

Levett lay back in his chair by the open window drinking in the music. The room seemed full of the fresh sweetness of white roses, wrapped in an extreme peace. Through half-closed eyes he looked across at Rachel as she sat playing, completely absorbed in the music. Her face wore an oddly serious look; her dark eyes were large, soft and yearning; her curious mouth was shut tightly. The long, white fingers which moved so lightly and yet powerfully over the keyboard fascinated Levett, and he thought of Verlaine's lines beginning, *"Le piano que baise une main frêle."* Why was it that Rachel, of whom he was fraternally so fond, was plainly the kind of woman one didn't marry or flirt with? How odd it was! There was no "come hither" in her eye. He divined that it wasn't her fault there wasn't. Perhaps it was just something insuperable in what she might have referred to with a *moue* as her "terrible refinement," which shut her off from the usual experiences. She was no prude—that he knew—and there was no subject under the sun which he could not have discussed with her with

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perfect freedom. What an odd thing, he reflected, is the human heart. Which of us really understands the secrets of another's actions or desires! He thought, as she left off playing Beethoven and began one of Chopin's mazurkas, that she would suddenly grow, one day, into one of the most delightful old women who ever existed. He loved old women, and in imagination he saw her with white hair and a rather sharpened sense of humour, sitting in her box at the opera and looking a perfect darling. How much happier she would be—when she was old enough not to waste time in unfulfilled hoping for things undefined.

Rachel brought her mazurka brilliantly to a close and smiled up at him, her face relaxing its tension. "We shall soon have to go down into the drawing-room," she said. "I think Sunday afternoon card-shunting is an agonising institution. It is quite painful to watch the boredom and discomfort of the nicer sort of young man who pays his respects on Sunday afternoons. Any man who does this sort of thing well is certain to be a toad. I cannot bear the accomplished caller!"

Levett got up and said that that reminded him of his own duties. He himself had some cards to leave. They arranged to go to the opera together on the following Thursday and to go on to a dance. "Good-bye, Rachel," said Levett with his hand on the door, "I've spent a really happy afternoon. Let me know how you get on with the education of Miss Cartier!"

Rachel smiled into the grey eyes of her friend, with their lurking devil of malice, and said she would ask him to meet her in a fortnight's time so that he could judge results!

After the door had closed behind him, she sat silently in front of the piano. Then she began playing again,

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left off abruptly, and again sat silent. The sun had gone behind some clouds, and a curious chill seemed to have come over everything. She could not think what was making her so miserable. She went into her bedroom to wash and to tidy her hair, then went down into the drawing-room to join her mother—who had returned from her luncheon party—just as the first caller arrived.

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CHAPTER VIII

DURING the hectic weeks which followed her first dance at the Fawsett Vivians, Margot felt herself to be actually living in a dream. It was impossible to realise everything at once. The rush of new sensations, the constant change of excitement, the succession of experiences and the bewildering speed at which her education was progressing combined to put her head in a whirl. Her eyes grew brighter and the impression she made of alertness and vigorous life became stronger, till she seemed almost febrile. She was so absorbed in her new experiences that she hardly had time to notice the slight chill in Mrs. Falkenheim's manner after the Frensen episode at the Fawsett Vivians' ball, though gradually and half consciously she became aware that the chill increased whenever she met and talked to Sir Carl. Mrs. Falkenheim was too kind, however, to allow her annoyance seriously to interfere with Margot's happiness. She was too "comfortable" to be terrifying, and she enjoyed indulging again, for her fair-haired Christian *protégée,* in maternal hopes and fears of which an unkind fate had otherwise deprived her. But it was quite different with Israel. If Margot had paused to think, had given herself a moment in which to indulge in nervousness, he would have seriously frightened her. As it was, she merely noted, with annoyance, the way he was constantly watching her out of his dark eyes. Since she had made the acquaintance of Jews she had learnt to hate and fear their racial secretiveness—their inability to put the cards on the table and be frank. She could never

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tell what the old man was getting at; his remarks disquieted her. But she could not help connecting his suspicions, like his wife's coldness, with her meeting with Sir Carl Frensen. She dated the subtle change in his manner from then. Sometimes his remarks seemed to indicate an uncanny insight, as though he had probed her to the bottom of her heart. Then there came the day when she caught him coming out of her room, and when she went to her writing table she was certain that two letters she had received that morning, one from Captain Stokes and one from Sir Carl, had been moved. Why was the old man spying on her? What did he suspect? Surely it was entirely her own affair whether she chose to take Mrs. Falkenheim's advice about Carl Frensen! She herself was not above reading private letters if they were left lying about, but she put this down as a natural feminine weakness. In men it seemed the low-water mark of all that was base. She could not imagine Jacky Bruce ever reading anybody's letter. It was the kind of thing a butler or a footman would do; in a man, something common and low. Mr. Falkenheim's investigations, however, contrived at last to upset her nerves, and the feeling that she was "suspected"—of something, she knew not quite what—became a kind of obsession which, while disturbing her peace of mind, lent a zest to her excitements. She seemed to live now on the edge of a precipice, and looked about wildly for something to catch hold of to save herself from falling if the Falkenheims should desert her. She did her best to consolidate her position with the Elkingtons, and Rachel's warm affection, the genuineness of which she could not doubt, was a great source of consolation. She kept up her correspondence also with Adam Henderson, to whom if necessary, she intended to pay a prolonged visit. She

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anted, in any case, to have as many ways of retreat from the Falkenheims open to her as possible.

Of all the people she had met during her stay in Richbourne Terrace, she cared most for Rachel and for Godfrey Levett. There was something about both of them which she looked for in vain in the others. They were different, there was a "beyond" to them; they possessed something more than a mere highly polished social surface.

Margot had greatly enjoyed meeting Levett again at dinner at the Elkingtons', and had subsequently been to tea with him at his quaint little house just off Church Street, Kensington, where he lived surrounded by books and pictures, in a luxurious bachelor retirement. But she was sprung from a stock to which business came almost automatically before pleasure, and she was determined not to waste too much of her precious time over friendships that were merely amusing. She decided very soon after her memorable *début* in Portland Place that the man most likely to be useful to her, to be "worth while," was Captain Stokes. She did not like anything about him excepting his appearance, but the more she heard concerning him, and the more reference books she consulted as to his family and antecedents, the more he became surrounded with attractive attributes, with a kind of halo of eligibility. She used to dream what it would be like to be Mrs. Vernon Stokes, with a little house perhaps in Queen Street or in John Street, and the certainty of becoming Lady Stokes whenever her father-in-law were tactful enough to die. No more Bayswater for her! She'd teach old Falkenheim to come reading her private letters—when she was Lady Stokes!

Margot was the kind of person whose dreams are always with them. She went in, unconsciously, for the

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process known as "thinking for results." She visualised herself in all the glory of a successful Mayfair marriage —and proceeded to treat Vernon Stokes like dirt. She refused his first three invitations, cut down his allowance of dances whenever they met (which was almost every night), and took care, at frequent intervals, to let her dislike of him be visible. The result of this firm line had been a luncheon at the Berkeley, two exciting days at Epsom for the Derby and the Oaks, and a little dinner at the Carlton, followed by a theatre and supper at the "Five Hundred Club" with his cousin Joyce Cornewall and a brother officer, called Lord Patcham. Then there had been an afternoon party at the family mansion in Charles Street, Berkeley Square, where she had enjoyed the thrilling experience of meeting "the parents" and had tried to size them up in order to be prepared for eventualities. Finally had come an invitation to dine with them quietly *en famille* and to go on afterwards to a dance. When this invitation came—it was in the first week of July—Margot felt that she had really made progress. The Falkenheims had been prevailed on to take her to Ascot, which was one of her cherished ambitions, and she had worn an adorable frock which suited her to perfection. She was sure she had looked her best. And now the long-desired invitation to dine in Charles Street had arrived. Her simple system had acted on Stokes with absolute precision, just as she had guessed it would act after their first encounter. She had learnt since then (through a chance remark of his which she had overheard) that he wandered about every night from dance to dance until he found her. Pleased as she was to make this discovery it did not escape her sharp intelligence that he enjoyed his pose of having the *entrée* everywhere just as much as he enjoyed

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finding her and dancing with her. This perception on her part indicated the growth of disillusion. The complexities of existence, however, which her plunge into London had revealed were still alarming and baffling, particularly as she gradually became more and more sensitive to the smaller differences separating one group from another. She could not accept things philosophically, acknowledging that (in the homely phrase) it takes all sorts to make a world. Her original belief that only one sort is to be found in *the* world, indeed, died with difficulty, and only received its death-blow when she began to have doubts as to what really constituted the world of worlds.

The dinner with the Stokes' had been made easy for her by Mrs. Falkenheim in a variety of subtle ways which Margot knew nothing whatever about, and for which she consequently gave her benefactress no credit. Just the right things had, in point of fact, been said about her, so that wherever she went her crudities were condoned, her small vulgarities of speech, manner, and point of view excused. She was something fresh and new, and at least associated with riches. Society was prepared to make allowances for her, and the rumour soon grew that she was heiress to some fabulous Canadian fortune.

When Margot arrived at the house in Charles Street, an unwonted feeling of nervousness came over her. There was something about the solidity of its great façade which seemed to symbolize the solidity of the family entrenched behind it. They were so terribly established, while she—she had nothing but her good looks and her Canadian drawl and her cheek to recommend her! At any moment she might be thrown on her own resources and have to retire ignominiously, a second-class passen-

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ger on a cheap boat, to the place whence she came. She thought of her dwindled store—she had only £361 8s. 4d. left—shuddered, and pulled herself together. The electric bell, rung by the Falkenheims' footman, seemed to her, as she sat in the car and listened, to make a mellow tintillation in the midst of vast spaces. Then the huge doors were opened by a footman, while the butler advanced slowly to meet her across the vault-like marble hall, which was lit from a rich crystal chandelier set high in the ceiling. The "marble hall" instead of oppressing her, seemed to go to her head. Who knew but what, some day, it might be her own? She had only to play her cards rightly, to bend the will of one vain and shallow man to hers, to become the future mistress of everything her eyes beheld. The thought seemed to lend her wings. By the time she found herself shaking hands with Lady Stokes, in the small drawing-room, the nervousness which had afflicted her while waiting in the car outside vanished completely.

At dinner Vernon was seen at his best. His mother's keen eye restrained the peacock from spreading its tail, and when he was not "showing off" Vernon had a certain humour which, while showing to advantage in the rather opulent surroundings, gave him many opportunities of flashing his beautiful teeth. Between Vernon and his father very little love seemed to be lost. Margot got the impression that his father in some way jarred Vernon's susceptibilities.

Sir William Stokes was a big, "brushed-up" man, with hands that must have been manicured every day. His hair, which was abundant, was going grey, and he wore a carefully trained grey moustache. His cruel blue eyes were eager, inquisitive; he was perpetually asking rude questions, and doing small acts of politeness in a rather

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pompous manner. It was obvious that to inferiors or undesirables he could be grossly insulting, with a hard, plutocratic insolence. Margot felt his sneering eyes on her during dinner, appraising her, and was almost overcome by a desire to insult first her host and then his son. The other guests were Lord Patcham and Joyce Cornewall, whom she had already met and whose engagement had been announced. Margot remembered having seen photographs of them in *The Tatler* the week before. These two kept up a constant flow of idiotic small talk, into which she and Vernon joined every now and then, while Sir William and Lady Stokes made a rarer chorus. Lady Stokes had a pathetic kind of crushed animation. When she laughed her eyes laughed too; the effect was startling, for it made her look years younger. Otherwise she was a sad-looking woman, with a sharp, rather acid way of speaking and a slightly chilling manner. Her hair was silky and quite white, her eyes were dark and bright, and with her face skilfully made up with a little rouge near the ears she looked altogether delightful, for she had retained her slim figure and beautiful shoulders. Margot felt she would like to ask her ever so many questions about life, about London, about Sir William, and, above all about Vernon. She felt that no one in the whole world could possibly know Vernon so well as his mother. . . .

Lady Stokes regarded her son from time to time with a melancholy smile; he was so like her, and yet so oddly like his father. He had his father's passion for correctness, for making an imposing appearance, but it took him in a more subtle way. From her he had inherited an excellent manner and a susceptibility to fine shades of feeling and conduct. But he was cursed with an inherited "consciousness," an inherited desire to be in the

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height of form; perhaps, even, an inherited uneasiness.

Sir William Stokes had not been by any means a self-made man. His father, an M.P. and Deputy-Lieutenant, had sent him to Eton and to Cambridge; he had been brought up from earliest youth amid the surroundings of wealth. The atmosphere of his home was, however, harshly material—for it had been only natural for his father to value the things he had struggled so persistently to obtain. Andrew Stokes, the founder of the family, had begun life as a skilled artisan in a Glasgow engineering works in early-Victorian days, and in marrying a doctor's daughter, a lady immeasurably "above" him at the time he married her, he had taken his first upward step. He was a hard-working man of the shark type, a man of one idea, which was to found a family and to make his son a gentleman. Sir William, perhaps as a result of the fierceness of his father's ambition, was almost a super-gentleman. From his place of education to the varnish on his boots you could not pick a hole in him anywhere, while by his marriage he had allied himself with one of the most ancient families in the kingdom. He belonged, exclusively, to the "best" clubs, and made a point of going where people go. But he did it all a little consciously, as though inviting admiration of his perfect gentility. He was curiously naïf about the things he valued. Had he been told that no one was "complete" who was not, say, a Privy Councillor, he would have set to work deliberately to attain that distinction in order that nothing might be missing. With Vernon the passion for correctness took him more subtly, and was largely a question of attitudes. His interest in every subject was bound up in his own attitude toward it. He was elaborately "not a snob," and often made a point of being seen cultivating his social inferiors. His atti-

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tude here was that, being himself Olympian, he could consort with whom he pleased—the more peculiar his companions, the more clearly they threw into relief his own superiority. He liked also to let it be seen that he was not merely the ultra-smart soldier, but had a taste for literature, for art, and such like matters. All this increased his feeling of superiority, as did his habit of being, on occasions, rather rude to harmless people of his own class, in order to show that he was above any snobbish display of merely being a "little gentleman." It was characteristic of the difference between father and son that Vernon Stokes would have suffered agonies at the thought of being rude to anyone beneath him in rank. He liked the incense of inferiors; it soothed the inward uneasiness that was his most deeply guarded secret.

Margot felt sorry for him as she looked at him and laughed during dinner, and made some drawling remark about the dances they had been to during the past week. It was so easy to make him wince that it seemed unfair to do so. He was very attentive to her, and behind his elaborate nonchalance and reserve she divined that he was very anxious for her to make a good impression on his mother and on his father. This perception thrilled her with a feeling of triumph; her eyes sparkled; she felt a sudden wave of self-confidence, particularly when she compared her lovely Doucet frock with Joyce Cornewall's foolish garment of pink chiffon which looked as if it had been run together by her mother's maid. Before the dinner was half-way through she had the satisfaction of finding that Lord Patcham addressed half his fatuous remarks to her; and she got the impression (which she adored) that for almost everyone in the room she was the centre of interest.

In an argument on night clubs and dancing clubs be-

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tween Patcham and Vernon, Margot found herself siding with Patcham.

"You're just like that Father what's-his-name, Vernon," Patcham remarked, "Your idea of a pleasant evening is 'a fashionable reunion!' Joyce and I like being *amused,* . . . and I expect Miss Cartier does too. We like to get away from the deadly round of 'fashionable affairs' . . ."

"I don't mind where I go," said Vernon, "as long as it isn't the suburbs of society. Really, my dear boy, some of those dance clubs . . . !" Vernon's eyebrows indicated unspoken volumes.

"There he goes again!" Patcham remarked. "Always thinking of what the *other* people are like! You don't have to dance with 'em, and they're just as amusing to watch as the average crowd at the Ritz—and very often ten times more so. Besides, they aren't afraid of being amused. They go there to *dance,* just as one goes to some decent pub like the Carlton or the Savoy to eat. And they pay the shot themselves, instead of sponging on some climber whose name they can't even remember. Now Vernon is never happy unless he is at a *function.* It must be some 'smart affair,' as Vesta Tilley would say, or he feels miserable! Isn't that so, Lady Stokes?" Lady Stokes, when appealed to, laughed at Patcham and said the world had moved on too quickly for her to keep pace with it.

"I must confess, though," she added, with a twinkle in her extraordinarily young eyes, "that I *have* a sneaking desire just to see what one of these clubs is like. . . ."

"Well, mother!" said Vernon with an expression of despair, "I never thought it of you! Of course, Patcham's views are natural enough—he's half a Yank to look at, and has a passion for being up-to-date at any

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price. As for Joyce, she's just a plain rip. As long as she thinks she is on the primrose path, she is game to waltz."

"It sounds like a subject for a Clapham debating society!" Joyce observed. "Do dance clubs lead to destruction?"

"It's because Clapham believes they do that it flocks to them in such numbers," laughed Vernon.

"Good old Clapham, then; it knows how to enjoy itself. We'll join in, too, Joyce, and have some of the fun," Patcham said. "We aren't proud so long as the floor and band are good and Joyce gets a chance of spotting the favourite!"

"You can't talk about spotting the favourite!" said Joyce with a flash of adorable eyes and a little malicious glance. "If you can believe it, Aunt Julia," she added, "he spends the whole of supper pointing out girls from the front row at Daly's or the Empire—'there goes Dolly Martin; that one over there is Jenny Peech'—and so on for hours together. I tell him he ought to leave me at home on these occasions . . . or else dissemble!"

"Ah, that's the bother," said Patcham; "I never could dissemble, could I, Vernon?" Vernon chuckled and looked through his lovely eyelashes. "About as much as an elephant!"

"I must say I agree with Vernon, you know, about those clubs," Sir William chimed in, just when the subject was ready for burial. "I think they are horrible places. It is a mystery to me why decent people go to them. No offence to you and Joyce, of course," he added in a gust of over-politeness. Vernon did not show any enthusiasm for being agreed with by his father, and began to differentiate between clubs, some of them meeting with a qualified approval. "What do *you* think

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about them, Miss Cartier?" Sir William asked with the air of putting a leading question on which his future opinion of Margot was to depend. This aggressiveness fired Margot's high spirits; her native unwillingness to be "put upon" asserted itself.

"You see," she drawled, "to me everything in London is amusing, and I don't really know what is smart and what isn't yet." Vernon winced at this. "I must say, though, I agree with Lord Patcham that the important thing is just to have a good time, and I'd sooner by far go to one of these clubs than to some reg'lar punk dance where everybody's bored rigid."

Sir William's eyebrows turned themselves into question marks at Margot's Colonial slang, but she returned his glance with interest, while Lady Stokes, with a little burst of laughter, remarked, "I think Miss Cartier has put the whole situation in a nutshell. Vernon, you will have to swallow your scruples one evening and take us all to the Five Hundred or to Martin's. . . ."

Vernon and his mother smlied affectionately at one another. His devotion to her was the thing Margot most liked about him.

The conversation strayed suddenly from dancing clubs to horses, and Patcham became eloquent, twisting his monocle and clipping his "g's." Newbury and Ascot were discussed from a highly technical standpoint which Margot found extremely dull; and the prospects for Goodwood were canvassed as seriously as if the Empire were at stake. Sir William joined in with animation, and Margot was surprised and annoyed to find that the women of the party could talk horses as fluently as the men. Lady Stokes had a great deal to say about a chestnut filly with white stockings who ran second in some "selling plate."

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On the whole, Margot was not sorry when dinner came to an end. There was something rather oppressive in its elaborate ceremonial, though the fact that there were two footmen to help the butler wait on six people seemed to her quite as it should be. After the initial pleasure of being taken down in great state on Sir William's arm, she had found the meal tedious, and was relieved when Lady Stokes rose from the table and the men were left to their port wine.

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CHAPTER IX

JOYCE CORNEWALL produced a cigarette-case as soon as they got back to the drawing-room, remarking, "Thank the Lord; now we can smoke—can't we, Aunt Julia?" just like a boy. Lady Stokes let the two girls chatter together, occasionally throwing in a word here and there. Margot thought what a dear she was, and how charming was Joyce, but she found it hard to keep her mind on the conversation. Her brain was working furiously; her eyes were everywhere. Each minute detail of the behaviour of the women she was with was noted and registered; every movement of a servant was observed; and as for the room, she would have been able to recite a complete inventory of its contents within ten minutes.

Margot fell an immediate victim to Joyce; she was an entirely unimagined type, and gave an impression of rakishness—combined with remaining a "thoroughly nice girl"—that was delightful. Margot no longer wondered what it was that Patcham saw in her, and only wished that Vernon had half the wit and charm of his cousin.

When the men came upstairs, Vernon said, "I thought of taking Miss Cartier on to Aunt Mary's. There will be several people there who won't mind chaperoning her. I've just been telephoning. I think Patcham and Joyce ought to put in an appearance for an hour or so before going to their scandalous haunts."

Aunt Mary Wilkinson was Joyce's *bête noire,* but she agreed because, in some vague way, she thought it might be friendly to Margot.

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Margot was not in the best of tempers at being forcibly "taken." She expected her desires to be consulted. It was true she had accepted in general terms, and had explained to Mrs. Falkenheim that she would be chaperoned by Captain Stokes' aunt, but she expected the dance to be at the Ritz or the Hyde Park Hotel—not in a turning off the Cromwell Road.

When they got to Mrs. Wilkinson's rather shabby house, Margot found herself once more in a fresh atmosphere. Would London *never* end, she thought! How could one get a general view of it, and see where one wanted to be? On a first inspection, what she afterwards discovered to be the South Kensington Anglo-Indian contingent (in full force) seemed to make up in manner what they may have lacked in mere wealth. Colonel Wilkinson was a personage in this particular set. "All Anglo-Indians," Joyce remarked confidentially to Margot, "have an incorrigible tendency to possess marriageable daughters and over-drafts at Grindlay's! That's why the plutocrats are here." She pointed out a row of over-dressed young men with blue chins, monocles and a sarcastic manner laboriously acquired. Margot got nearer to caring for Vernon, as she looked at Joyce's plutocrats and realised all the things he wasn't, than she had ever been before.

The dance turned out better than it looked; there was an infectious gaiety in the room which made it go with a swing. The girls, even the "debs," seemed to have a bit more ginger in them than the pallid "tish-tishy" creatures Margot had seen at the more expensive entertainments. Their clothes were cheap, but they wore them with an air. Joyce she particularly admired. This girl, with her dare-devil, proud eyes, enchanted her and reminded her of a portrait by Gainsborough of a Miss

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Singleton, which Rachel had pointed out once in the National Gallery. Vernon introduced her to his grandmother, and to various aunts and other relatives, and also to his grandfather. The old couple amused Margot particularly. Mrs. Cornewall was large, incredibly old, and highly ornamented. She had tiny hands and feet (of which she was inordinately vain), and her "starers" hid young, laughing eyes, like the eyes of Vernon's mother. "My dear," she said to Margot, "what a nice neck Patcham has; and do you see the charming way his hair lifts from his forehead! It's a funny thing, but we women never get too old to admire the men!" She laughed and looked so pretty that Margot was tempted to throw her white arms round the old lady's neck and give her a resounding kiss on both cheeks. General Cornewall also made a conquest. He belonged to the "Boggley-Wallah" type of Indian administrator, and Vernon told Margot how, in his youth, he had been sent to rule a territory as large as Belgium, consisting, for the most part, of virgin forests. He had arrived with an army of workmen, and the workmen proceeded to erect a gigantic larder and wine cellar. These he filled with every luxury known to the gourmet, with wines from every famous vineyard, with stores of provisions sufficient to last him for several years. When his preparations were completed he ran up a little house conveniently near his larder and proceeded to bellow at the natives, standing on the outskirts of the virgin forest. After he had bellowed persistently for four or five years, the natives naturally mistook him for a god and obeyed him implicitly. Of the bellowing habit he had been unable to break himself, and his small talk at dances reverberated above the loudest band. He was seventy-nine years old, rather ungainly in build, and wore a short grey

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beard. He was never seen without a woolen comforter disposed somewhere about his person. Margot noticed the ends of it appearing out of the inside pocket of his evening coat.

Margot danced the first two dances with Vernon. Just as the second one came to an end, she noticed Godfrey Levett and Rachel coming into the room, and insisted on Vernon taking her across to them. Vernon knew both Levett and Miss Elkington slightly. He could not forget them because, being extremely sensitive to the impression he made on people, he realised that they both disliked him. He asked Rachel for a dance in the hope that she would talk to him about Margot, while the blonde devil who was driving him distracted was carried off by Levett.

Margot always felt interested, alert, excited when she was with Levett. She never knew what he might do next. He was so unlike any of the well-worn types she had met so constantly; he was an original, and might perhaps be very wicked. She almost hoped he was. After they had danced, they went out into the street to get cool, as there was no garden, and the balcony was crowded. They walked on under the stars through the warm summer night, and Margot felt a wave of emotion flowing over her; she felt as though she could walk on and on seeking some great adventure, some great love; there was a strange magic over everything; the intoxication of her own youth and loveliness rose to her head. She felt herself to be a princess. When they got to the end of the street of silent houses a taxi drew up by their side.

"Let's cut two dances and go for a spin," Levett suggested. "No one will know, and we shall be back in heaps of time for supper!"

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They drove off down the deserted street, and, half expecting what was going to happen, Margot found herself in Levett's arms, with his lips pressed to hers. She sat with his arm holding her tightly, with her head on his shoulder, speechless with excitement. The meaning of existence seemed suddenly to be revealed to her. She felt no affection for Levett, none for Vernon, but she was absorbed with interest in her own sensations. Once again the male lips sought hers; she felt herself eagerly desired, and the realisation of this gave her pleasure, while through her veins there ran a thrill that was almost painful. She had never experienced anything like it; she did not know what it meant; but it seemed that she had never before lived so intensely as at this moment. All her other experiences seemed a little cheap by contrast.

"You are an enchanting creature!" murmured Levett, looking at her with a light in his eyes. "Whoever gets you will be a lucky man, Margot. You are so deliciously *inexperimentée,* in some ways; so very much all there in others."

Margot detested Levett's habitual note of raillery, and it annoyed her that, even while his passion for her was almost overmastering him, he should at the same time be appraising her, with mockery and a cynical amusement.

"You've no heart!" he said abruptly. "Not a scrap. . . . All the same, one of these days someone will wake you up. . . ."

She drew away from him in annoyance and began tidying her hair. Then she turned to him again. "I wonder if I *am* cold," she said. Her eyes were bright in the moonlight which came through the window of the cab; her beautiful bosom was in distress; she looked

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the image of a passionate woman, but her eyes were not soft, and her brain was alert for his answer. He lighted a cigarette first, taking the silver case deliberately out of his breast pocket, choosing one carefully and tapping it on the case. Then he told the chauffeur to drive back, and fingered his tie. "My dear," he said, "you give me the impression of never having cared for anyone except yourself, simply because you've never met anyone to care for. When love comes to you I hope, for your sake, it will be for the man you are going to marry. . . ."

"By the way," Levett continued, in an altered voice, "has he proposed yet?"

"Godfrey, you nasty creature!" Margot replied, laughing in spite of herself. "Of course he hasn't . . . yet."

"He will when he finds you've cut two or three of his dances!" Levett replied. "I'm a perfect fairy godfather to you two. You must be sure to ask me to the wedding."

"If I had known *you* didn't care a scrap I wouldn't have let you . . ." Margot replied irrelevantly. His answer was to take her again in his arms and cover her eyes and mouth with kisses. Her excitement was almost more than she could bear. "You devil," she gasped, tearing herself away from him as they began to draw near the Wilkinson's house, "I don't know what it is you do to me, but if either of us is cold, it's you."

"So you see," said Godfrey, "we ought to be awfully good friends. You must come and have tea with me again on Thursday, and become the devil's disciple."

They got out of the cab and turned the corner of the street stealthily. A number of girls and men were walking about in front of the house, and they strolled

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very slowly, with an elaborate imitation of the walk of a couple who have just been dancing, towards the others. They entered the house, when the music started, surrounded by other people, and began, unobtrusively, to dance. Margot could tell, however, by a look in Vernon's eye, that he knew quite well where she had been, even if his aunt did not.

She danced the next dance with him, after which they went down to supper. Mrs. Cornewall and the General were already installed. It was Mrs. Cornewall's duty to find her husband everything good there was to eat which his doctor would allow him. He sat at a table alone with his wife, a napkin tucked into his neck, like a *commis-voyageur*, immense and serious, while all kinds of dishes were collected round him. "Your grandad's a real peach, Vernon," Margot remarked in a more conciliatory tone than she usually adopted, "but he's a no end messy feeder, and no mistake!"

The ex-Administrator could be heard bellowing comments on the different dishes to his wife, who listened dutifully as she had listened for the last fifty years.

"Grandfather likes his meals," Vernon replied. "He lives at Clevedon, you know, and goes out shopping every morning in his carriage. I met him outside a fishmonger's a little while ago, holding a large turbot to his chest and prodding it to see if it was a good 'un. Eventually he gave the turbot back and bought another one up the road for less money!"

Margot at the bottom of her heart felt that it was hardly in accordance with her ideal for an English aristocrat to haggle with a fishmonger, but she concealed this as far as she could. . . .

"I hope you had an amusing walk?" Vernon remarked after a pause, helping her to some champagne. She

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could see that he was struggling with himself to make his voice sound normal.

"Very, thanks."

"You cut about four dances!" he said with a sigh. "Just my luck! And Aunt Mary kept asking where you were. You'll have to go and do the polite. . . ."

This remark of Vernon's rather nonplussed Margot. Her first instinct was to put Vernon in his place, but his suggestion that she had in some way transgressed the laws of etiquette in regard to his aunt was extremely disconcerting. She looked round for Rachel, who was supping at another table, and beamed at her with affection. This look heartened her; she wished she could get two minutes with Rachel and ask her advice.

"I'm sorry if your aunt thought I was away a long time," Margot remarked haughtily. "I ought not to have come without a proper chaperon."

"Oh, nonsense," Vernon said. "It's quite all right, really. Of course, it *is* a little complicated my not having dined at the Falkenheims' since you have been staying with them. But I dare say it wasn't possible to work it. In any case, it doesn't matter a rap, and Aunt Mary gave me up ages ago. She has a certain steely glance which she reserves for me."

Margot had never known Vernon to "drop hints" before that anything about her was anything else than perfect, and the suggestion that she might have betrayed her ignorance, with him, in some serious way, alarmed her. She lost all pleasure in the dance, and, after a hurried word with Rachel, while she was powdering her nose, she decided to go home. It was Rachel's advice whenever one felt things were not going quite right. She announced her intention coldly to Vernon, and was pleased by his look of disappointment. She was so pre-

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occupied now with the danger which seemed to threaten her schemes that she completely forgot about Levett, who watched her, with amusement, out of a corner of his eye, while dancing with one of the Miss Wilkinsons.

When she found herself in the taxi by the side of Vernon she was kinder to him than she usually allowed herself to be, and, laying her hand for a moment on his knee, told him she was sorry she had missed the dances, but she had been discussing something rather important, and had not noticed how the time flew. Vernon trembled all over when she touched him. He shook so much that he could hardly speak. She looked at him curiously, and felt her heart warming toward him. He, at any rate, wasn't pretending. "Don't be angry, Vernon," she said, "or I shall turn you out of the cab and drive home by myself!"

"By Gad, you are a cruel goddess!" he muttered through his moustache. "You've got me gagged and bound, Margot," he whispered. It was characteristic that in expressing his love for her he did so in the most impressive way he knew by telling her that she had no less a person than Vernon Stokes at her mercy.

Margot felt a wave of triumph sweeping over her. She looked at him and smiled, but she was determined to stave off the embrace which threatened. He was busy putting her on a pedestal, and she did not want him, too soon, to find the way up the ladder.

"You are an old fool, Vernon!" she said caressingly.

"You don't care for me. . . ."

"I do care, very much. But perhaps not in the way you want."

"There is only one way."

"Oh, no, there isn't. Caring isn't a sudden thing. Besides, how can I tell yet? Or you either, for that mat-

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ter. All this is only an evening's amusement with you. I don't believe you are in the least sincere!"

"Good Lord, ain't I!" he said with an effort at lightness which failed dismally. His elaborate social mask was dropped, and in the trembling and beautiful male animal by her side she suddenly saw a victim which inscrutable fate had delivered into her hands. He put his arm slowly round her waist; she could feel the electricity of his eagerness through her clothes as his hand touched her. But she did not intend to capitulate too soon. She freed herself and turned her face away from his lips. She was conscious that he was shaking with nervous eagerness, at her mercy. How different this was from her truant drive with Godfrey Levett. She had never had Levett at her mercy, and while he was able to laugh with those mocking grey eyes of his, he never would be at her mercy, or at the mercy of any woman. He never put her on any pedestal—on the contrary! She grew angry when she thought that his action had been brutal and contemptuous. But not very angry. She was not at all sure that she did not like brutality and contempt. It was so exciting. Evidently Vernon found it so as well. Good Heavens! she had forgotten all about him. Her thoughts had wandered. Was he speaking to her?

Vernon had not noticed her momentary distraction. In spite of his nervousness of desire, he was by no means inclined to underrate himself, and her apparent moodiness he put down to her natural excitement at his avowal. Once more he insinuated the protective arm round her waist. The journey was so nearly ended! "Don't you think you could care for me, Margot, dear, just a little? We could be so happy if we were married. . . . I am sure we could. . . ."

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"Vernon—you mustn't say those things," Margot whispered in studiously emotional tones as the cab drew up at the Falkenheim's door. "I like you very much as a friend. . . . but, as for anything else . . . how can I tell when I have only known you a few weeks?" Vernon bit his moustache with mortification. How he loathed that phrase, "I like you very much as a friend." It had been used to him by a pretty chorus girl as he was driving her back to her flat after a Covent Garden ball, in his Sandhurst days. His vanity had never got over that knock.

"I think you are the cruelest and most beautiful creature that ever lived," he said as he handed her back her key after unlocking the great front door for her. "I wish I could forget all about you for ever!"

"Try!" she said, laughing at him joyously as she closed the door.

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CHAPTER X

"WILL you come and make some calls with me this afternoon, my dear?" Mrs. Falkenheim let the request fall placidly, during luncheon, about a week after the dinner party at Charles Street. She spoke as though no special importance attached to the matter, but Margot happened to have promised to go to tea with Sir Carl Frensen that afternoon. She was particularly anxious to placate Mrs. Falkenheim, but at the same time she didn't see why she should give up a visit on which she had set her heart, just because the Falkenheims and Sir Carl happened to be enemies.

"Yes, I think I can," she said, to gain time, and she was deliberating what she should do, when she encountered the malignant glance of Israel Falkenheim fixed upon her. He was sitting facing the window, with the light full on him, so that every flicker of expression on his face was observable by Margot. He looked as though his thin, cold fingers might have clutched a knife if the butler had not been standing just behind him. Elemental passion, as old as human nature, seemed to burn in his black eyes; his lips were pressed tightly together. Margot's heart sank when she looked at him. She was no coward, but this momentary withdrawal of the mask on her host's part, made her pause. She had no intention of giving up her visit to Sir Carl, but she thought it as well to be diplomatic. She appeared to consider for a moment; then she remarked blandly to Mrs. Falkenheim:

"Oh, no; do you know, I am afraid I can't come with you this afternoon after all? I have just remembered I

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promised to go round to Rachel's and help her buy a hat. What a nuisance! But I promised Rachel most particularly!"

"Oh, it doesn't matter, dear," said Mrs. Falkenheim in her fat voice. She appeared to retire into herself—ruminating.

Again Margot's eyes met Israel's. The butler was in the act of handing him the savoury. He helped himself abruptly; then, with spoon and fork half-way between the dish and his plate, paused and put the morsel of toast and fish back on the dish.

" No, I won't have any," he remarked in a harsh and strained tone. . . . "Excuse me." He rose quickly and went out. Margot felt herself going white as the heavy mahogany door closed behind him with a thud and Fraser's face assumed that expression of ultra-indifference which even Margot had come to realize meant that he had missed nothing.

Mrs. Falkenheim made no comment, and Margot swallowed her hock quickly and was glad when she could without loss of dignity escape. When she reached her room she flew at once to her writing-table, and the situation was revealed to her in a flash as she pulled open one of the drawers and found at the bottom of it Sir Carl Frensen's note, inviting her. How could she have been so maniacally careless as to leave it lying about! Of course, Israel had been to her room and read it. He didn't believe her; he knew she meant to go, and that what she had said about Rachel was a lie.

"Very well," thought Margot, "I will go just to spite him . . . the old beast."

Counsels of prudence were thrown to the winds. Her facile successes had mounted so much to her head that she felt her position impregnable. And she wanted to

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bring the whole matter to a crisis. Ever since she had known Sir Carl the atmosphere of the house in Richbourne Terrace had been growing increasingly chilly and was now become thick with suspicion and unfriendliness. She felt that, sooner or later, there would have to be some understanding. To the voice, inside herself, which suggested caution—now that all she had worked for was so nearly achieved—she paid no attention. Her brain was abnormally excited by all the other strange and thrilling and intoxicating things which had happened to her during the past three months, culminating in Vernon's proposal after the Wilkinson's dance. How delightful it had been not immediately to accept him, to keep him dangling for a little while on the string. She knew that at any moment she could subside into his arms and make him the happiest man in London by so doing. It was delicious to put off the moment whilst allowing him to hope. Margot glanced around her beautiful bedroom and then looked at herself in the long cheval glass in front of the window. She looked at the whiteness of her neck, at the swell of her bosom and her narrow hips and long legs and preened herself before the glass in her lovely frock. She thought of the quiver in Vernon's voice when he had spoken to her that night in the taxi, of the look of ecstasy which she had surprised in his eyes at Hurlingham the day before, when they strolled together along the path by the river. How he had shaken all over with the intensity of his love! Even Godfrey Levett, that cynical despiser of women, had very nearly been carried off his feet by her beauty. Why should she let herself be bullied by a horrid old Jew just because she happened to be staying in London at his expense! It was too much; she would show him that she could stand quite securely on her own two feet, and was not dependent

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exclusively on his protection. The luxury to which he had introduced her had become so much a necessity of her nature and so familiar a part of her life that she could not realize now that there was any possibility of her ever having to do without it. In thought she was already Mrs. Stokes, already mistress of a house in Mayfair—on the threshold of a long career of social triumphs.

She waited in her room until the car came round and she saw Mrs. Falkenheim enter it and drive off. She was a little surprised that Mrs. Falkenheim had not sent up to ask if she could deposit her at Rachel's. The fact that she had not done so made her feel vaguely uneasy. She went out as soon as Mrs. Falkenheim had gone, and when she had walked a few yards down Richbourne Terrace it occurred to her to look back at the house. When she did so she noticed for one brief moment the white, wrinkled face of Israel Falkenheim looking down at her from the drawing-room window. Something in his glance made her shiver. She turned quickly and hurried on.

Margot went on foot to Hyde Park Street in order to be able, if necessary, to establish the fact that she had called there. Rachel happened to be in, and she was shown up into the music-room. She told her friend a little of what had happened, and, rather to her disappointment, she thought Rachel did not seem very sympathetic.

"Of course, one *does* rather have to consider the feelings of one's host, I suppose," Rachel murmured, after she had heard the story. Margot felt a temptation to be voluble in her own defence, but the motto *qui s'excuse s'accuse* occurred to her mind, and she swallowed her protestations.

"Now I must go, darling," she said. "It has been

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jolly to see you, and you won't forget we've bought a hat together, will you?"

Rachel smiled at her dear one and said she wouldn't forget. Then, just as Margot was leaving the room, she went over to her, put her soft arm round her friend's neck, and kissed her quickly. Margot felt vaguely troubled as she disentangled herself and went downstairs. . . .

She was annoyed with Rachel for hinting that she ought to have consulted Israel Falkenheim's wishes about Sir Carl; and this view, coming from the woman who professed so much affection for her, made her apprehensive. It was, however, too late to turn back now. She got into an open taxi and told the man to drive across the Park to Belgrave Square. She was not quite sure, once she had started, and the taxi had begun to mingle with the throng of carriages and cars, that this was not an idiotic move on her part. Supposing Lady Stokes or Vernon or the Fawsett Vivians should see her!

She was almost like a cat in her love of sunshine and warmth, and as she put up her sunshade and felt the heat of the July sun on her body through her thin clothes, and saw the hard, sparkling blue of the sky, the dusty greenery of the trees, the splendour of the costumes of the women who drove past her, she was pervaded by a sense of confidence and well-being. By the time she had reached Sir Carl's house her fears had almost entirely subsided. . . . A shabby, middle-aged individual with a draggled black moustache put his head for a moment out of the window of a cab and watched her as she climbed the steps. She wondered why he was so interested in her, and looked instinctively to see if by some unfortunate accident a minute hole had appeared in one of her silk stockings. . . . Then she rang the bell.

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Sir Carl received her in a small room on the first floor, opening out of his enormous library. The library occupied the whole of the front of the house, and had evidently been intended by the architect as a ballroom. The ornamented ceiling was supported by two rows of marble pillars. Above the carved, black oak bookcases the walls were a dull gold, which with the rich reds and greens of the leather bindings of the books gave the room an appearance at once of sumptuousness and solemnity. What should a "financier" want with all these books, Margot wondered. The room reminded her of the library of Christ Church, Oxford, which Vernon Stokes had motored her over to see one day.

The only picture in the great room was a magnificent Rembrandt, which brooded over the heavy marble chimneypiece. The parquet floor was highly polished and slippery, and covered here and there with Persian rugs. The furniture was massive and plain, and resembled that of a man's club to which Margot had once been taken as a guest. Through the immensely tall French windows, two of which were standing open, she could see the trees of Belgrave Square and hear the whir of passing motors; the curious crunch of the taxis changing gear; the faint, thrilling murmur of London. The butler—a youngish, dark-eyed man, swarthy as an Italian and much more like a good waiter at the Carlton or the Savoy than a butler—piloted her slowly across the library till she reached the small square door in the wall which led into the cabinet.

Sir Carl dragged himself to his feet to receive his visitor, and stood leaning heavily on his gold-headed malacca cane, just as he had leant on it at the Fawsett Vivians' when she had first met him.

"I oughtn't to come to tea with you like this; I know

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I oughtn't!" laughed Margot, giving him her hand with her most radiant smile. "But I just can't resist coming to see your lovely house. It's like being in a fairy-tale to anyone like me!"

Sir Carl settled himself in his chair when he had made Margot comfortable, and the large smoke-grey Persian, which had been dislodged at Margot's arrival, climbed back with solemn dignity on to his master's lap.

"He purs fit to bust himself, doesn't he?" Margot remarked, quaking before the yellow, basilisk eyes and venturing, with some trepidation, a caress that was promptly resented. "It's a she," said Sir Carl. "A Saturnian mother, who doesn't hesitate to devour her young when they displease her!"

"Ugh!" said Margot in disgust.

"Not at all. Drusilla has all the qualities of the perfect woman. She dislikes everyone except her lord and master, and she doesn't even allow *him* to take liberties!"

Drusilla stopped purring, and fixed her yellow eyes with the tiny streak of black pupil in them once again on Margot.

"It's charming of you, my dear, to come and see an old man like me," Frensen remarked, when the servants had left the room after bringing in the tea-table. "I hope there weren't—difficulties."

"There were," said Margot. "Heaps!"

This reply seem to send Sir Carl into convulsions of silent laughter. He grasped his red beard, and his eyes grew watery in their red rims as he struggled with his amusement.

"Poor Israel!" he remarked.

"Why did you quarrel so?" Margot asked inquisitively.

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Frensen did not answer her; he only continued to smile.

"It's all very well for you to laugh," said Margot, "but it's no laughing matter for me, I can tell you. He is pretty well all I have to cling on to, and the thought that I'm coming to see you just about makes him mad."

"Oh, that is serious," said Sir Carl. "You mustn't run into any trouble on my account. But why is he all you have? . . . You have me."

It was Margot's turn to laugh. "You see, I'm being respectable!" she said.

"That's rather silly, isn't it—for anyone as beautiful as you are? I may be old, but I would make you happier than your respectability. I would do a lot for you, Margot. . . . I would take you to all the places in the world that are worth looking at—to Deauville, to the Riviera, to Rome, Petersburg, Vienna. . . ."

"I should faint, or get up and hit you, if I were one of these English girls!" Margot exclaimed. "You talk like Satan in the Bible when he took Christ up to the pinnacle of the temple!"

Frensen chuckled softly. "Ah! but you are not one of them; you have far too many brains to be an English 'miss.' And you enjoy the spectacle of wealth too frankly to have been used to it for long."

"You've got eyes!" said Margot with admiration.

He put his hand gently on her arm, then held it tightly in his. She felt his fingers pressing into her flesh through the stuff.

"Yes."

She looked at him. She didn't dislike him in the least for wanting her to be his mistress. There was something about him that was outside and beyond conventional morality, and therefore exciting. She suddenly felt that

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she wanted him to admire some of her splendid lies. The need to tell him the truth became irresistible.

"What do you think I am, then?" she asked.

"My dear," he said, "you come from Canada and you are very lovely; and you are not a Jewess. Beyond that I haven't really speculated. You can't be a big fortune —forgive me—or you would certainly not be dependent on friend Israel!"

"No, I am not a big fortune," said Margot. "I'm a grocer's daughter, and a poor one at that. My father was a very small grocer; I've got about two hundred and fifty pounds in the bank, and I believe I'm going to be married, if nothing goes wrong. We can be great friends when I'm married. My husband will be so rich you won't need to look down on me."

"Ah, I'm a banker, I know, but in spite of that I might conceivably look down on you less still if you married a poor man."

Margot looked at him with uneasiness, as though he were chaffing her in some way which she could not quite understand.

"I mean it!" he said.

"You aren't going to tell me you are a sentimentalist," she began.

"Oh, no, but I believe in love, and still more in passion. Passion is the fire of life, and when we leave it or it leaves us we go cold and die. You know there can be a passion of hate," he added. "At least you ought to! . . . Have you ever loved anyone, Margot?"

"No, I don't think so. Of course, I've been fond of people," Margot confessed. "What a funny question!"

"Give me your hands for a moment," he asked. Margot suppressed a temptation to be arch and held out her carefully manicured and rather well-shaped hands.

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Sir Carl held the tips of her fingers in his cold grasp and stared intently at her palms, and then at the knuckles at the back of her hands, while Margot watched him furtively with a sidelong, upward glance. "My dear," he said at last, "I don't know from the look of your hands whether you will really make a quite successful adventuress! If you go too near that fire I told you of your wings may get scorched."

"Well, I haven't made an ass of myself in that way yet," said Margot rather huffily, "and I'm twenty-three and I've had heaps of time."

"Look out when you have been married two or three years and are twenty-six or seven," said the old man lightly. "Come and tell me then if you are in any trouble. I may be able to help."

"All right, I will," said Margot. "I'll keep you to it, mind! Specially as my coming to see you has probably done me in good and proper with the Falkenheims."

"Poor Israel!" said Frensen, reflectively. He sat back in his chair, with his hands on the gold knob of his malacca cane, staring in front of him out of his red eyes. Margot felt herself in the presence of some story which dwarfed her own, which made all her little schemes seem unimportant. She divined the passions to which the old man had referred—those fierce, volcanic emotions of which she had read, but with which she had hitherto never come into contact. What had happened between him and Israel Falkenheim to cause Israel's extraordinary hatred? She felt convinced that whatever had happened, Israel had been the injured party—had been the one to suffer. She concluded it must have been some question of money, since everyone knew that cash was all the Jews cared about. But if it was only that, why had Mrs. Falkenheim been so upset on the evening of

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the Fawsett Vivians' dance? She wasn't specially money-grubbing, and in any case she had everything she wanted. . . .

The butler and a footman came back to carry away the tea things, and Sir Carl's reverie ended. He offered Margot a cigarette, and his eyes gloated over the opening of her red lips and the tightening of her frock over her bosom as she leaned forward to take a light. He got a great deal of pleasure from her movements, and would have liked it if he could have persuaded her to do exercises in front of him, so that he could lie back in his chair and watch her limbs in action. He felt suddenly very old and tired—but he still had sufficient grip on life to be perpetually interested. Margot's vitality was a tonic to him. Her youth and vigour, her look of health, all appealed to him, and he was curious about the secrets of her character. It gave him a kind of sensual satisfaction to probe her mind, to try to discover her inmost thoughts and emotions. It was one of the few amusements he had left, and he was willing to do much to gratify it. His mind had unexpected compartments, and in the course of a life almost entirely spent amid important happenings, in dealings with the great, and in a somewhat rarefied intellectual atmosphere, it was now a delight to him to occupy himself with the thoughts and plans of a pretty grocers' daughter embarked on an adventure. Even Cæsar had his relaxations. . . .

Margot, on her side, was flattered by his interest, nervous of what he might "do next," impressed by his eminence. At the same time, she felt ashamed of herself for having gone against Israel Falkenheim's wishes by coming to see him, and apprehensive of the results. After all, she was not yet Mrs. Vernon Stokes. There was plenty of time for the proverbial "slip."

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She threw away her cigarette and got up to go.

"You must come and see me again," said Sir Carl. "We must have dinner together one night and go to the Opera. . . ."

"I should like to," Margot answered—"when I'm settled!" She laughed at him and gave him her hand. As she turned to go, the tall handle of her sunshade knocked a heavy silver photograph frame off the top of a buhl cabinet which stood by the side of Sir Carl's chair.

"There, what a clumsy fool I am," she said, as she stooped to pick it up. "And the glass is all broken, too!" She put the photograph back on the cabinet, examining it as she did so. It was a very old photograph, and showed a handsome woman of about thirty, with strongly marked Jewish features. Margot could not repress a gasp of astonishment.

"Why!" she said to herself, as the butler appeared in answer to Frensen's ring. "Why, I'll be hanged if that isn't Mrs. Falkenheim as a young woman!"

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CHAPTER XI

As Margot's taxi re-crossed the Park—gay in the afternoon sunshine and more crowded than ever—she experienced once again a curious feeling of apprehension. In spite of the heat of the day she gave a slight shiver. There was something sinister about Sir Carl Frensen, something curious about the Falkenheims. Why had Mrs. Falkenheim's photograph been in Sir Carl's study, since they were such enemies? Perhaps years ago there had been an "affair" between them, and that was why Israel hated him so! . . .

Margot felt all on a sudden very lonely and very homesick for people of her own kind, whom she had never known. Even Rachel was really a stranger to her and lived in a world apart. When she had paid the taxi and rung the bell, she waited outside the heavy double doors of the house in Richbourne Terrace with a kind of dread. The footman, a white-faced, rather furtive youth who looked as though he spent his time hanging about with the housemaids, seemed to glance at her with ominous intentness when he opened the door —a kind of insolent curiosity.

The house, as she entered it, seemed empty, silent, threatening. She asked if there were anyone in the drawing-room and was told that there was no one there. Mrs. Falkenheim was in, but "engaged."

Margot went upstairs thoughtfully to her room, feeling rather like a naughty child conscious of having been in the jam cupboard and fearful of having left tell-tale traces. Whatever was in store for her, she was

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anxious to get it over. She wondered what Mrs. Falkenheim was "engaged" in.

When she reached her bedroom she was surprised to hear the sound of voices and the noise of a drawer being rather violently closed. She paused for an instant with one hand on the door-knob, her heart nearly stopping. Then she went in, and to her amazement saw Marie handing out her clothes from the wardrobe to Waters the housemaid, who was folding them up. Waters was kneeling on the floor by the side of one of her steamer trunks, which was already half full of her things. Margot paused and gazed at the two women in amazement. "What are you doing?" she said. In a moment she could have bitten out her tongue.

"We were told that Mademoiselle wished to have her things packed," said Marie in equal astonishment. "We shall have finished in a very few minutes now. There is a note for Mademoiselle on the dressing-table."

Margot snatched the envelope, and saw at once that it was in Israel Falkenheim's handwriting.

"That is quite all right, Marie," she said, in as normal a voice as possible. "The only thing is that I probably shan't want the luggage moved till to-morrow. However, you may as well finish now you have begun. . . ."

She looked at herself in the glass for a moment, straightened her hat, arranged her veil, pouted, and walked slowly out of the room with the eyes of the two maids boring round holes in her smartly tailored back. Once on the landing, with her bedroom closed, she looked around for a moment, like a startled animal, then darted into the bath-room, bolting the door behind her, and sank down on the wooden form which stood against the wall facing the bath. She tore open the envelope with nervous fingers. A cheque and two five-pound notes

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fell out of the letter on to her lap. "Mr. Israel Falkenheim," she read, "regrets that he cannot extend his hospitality to Miss Carter beyond to-day. He begs that she will accept his cheque for £100 and also the smaller sum in cash which he encloses for her immediate expenses."

Her face went quite white when she realised the meaning of the letter which she held in her hand. In some way he must have managed to have her followed to Belgrave Square! He could not have done this merely on suspicion. The idea came to her to insist on seeing him, to try to bluff the matter out and deny that she had visited Sir Carl, bringing in Rachel to give evidence in corroboration of her story. But after a moment's reflection she saw that this was hopeless. No one as cautious as Israel Falkenheim would have acted as drastically as this without proof. . . . Suddenly she recalled the creature with the black moustache who had put his head out of a cab and watched her going up the steps to Sir Carl's house. Why, of course, that man must have been a detective sent to follow her! The thought seemed to stun her. She remained sitting on the wooden form staring at the shining bath-taps, at the polished mahogany sides of the bath, at its inviting porcelain depths, at the floor of green mosaic and the blue-tiled walls of the room. She was dazed, incapable of thought or action, and it was some time before she could pull herself sufficiently together to think out what to do. To be turned suddenly on the streets like a dismissed servant, to be hunted, spied on like some forger—it was abominable! All that the Falkenheims had already done for her seemed to give her an unanswerable claim on them to do more. A passion of fury welled up in her heart as she read Israel Falkenheim's letter. Its brevity, its reference

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to "Miss Carter," the insulting way in which she was being bought off for a paltry £100, all infuriated her to fever pitch. She leapt to her feet at last, hastily unbolted the door, and strode out on to the landing. Then, as she stood on the soft carpet, watched the highly-polished bedroom doors all around her, and thought of the comfort to which they gave access, her heart seemed to turn to water inside her, and she could have wept with despair at her own folly. She again debated in her mind whether she should go down and beard Israel in his study or burst in on Mrs. Falkenheim and demand an explanation. Finally, she decided that it would pay her best not to have any scenes. She would be dignified, hurt. She would show the Falkenheims how well she could get along without them. . . .

She went into her bedroom again, where Marie and Waters were just finishing packing her evening frocks. She gave instructions that her necessary things for two or three nights should be put into a small suit-case, locked it as well as her trunks, and remarked that she would be "back again later." The black glances of Marie, who saw herself being defrauded of her tip, did something to lessen Margot's gloom as she walked thoughtfully down the great staircase and let herself out into the street.

The heavy cars were swooping—opulent and majestic—up and down the broad road, bearing their occupants back from making calls in time for them to dress for their dinner-parties. Society was terminating its afternoon duties, preparing for its evening pleasures.

Margot remembered with a sharp stab of irritation that there was to be a dinner-party that night at the Falkenheims' at which people she knew—the Fawsett Vivians and others, but luckily not Vernon Stokes—were

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to be present. And in a week's time Mrs. Falkenheim was giving a dance, ostensibly in her honour. The invitations had been sent out over a month ago! How were they going to explain her absence? What infamous stories would they tell about her? What could she say that would explain her hurried departure? Nobody, she reflected, ever believes the stories the poor tell about the rich. . . .

She had reached the Park before she had come to any decision as to what to do. Soon it would be dinner-time. The heat of the day had worn off, and the Park was delicious, enticing, a green fairyland with lengthening shadows. She entered it by the ornamental stone "waterworks" at the end of the Serpentine, and walked to where the early-Victorian nymphs clasped broken stone pitchers to their breasts. She stood there, deep in thought, glancing down every now and then at the placid ducks engaged in their evening amusement of turning slowly upside down. The chestnut trees on her left were a heavy, languorous green—suggestive of warmth, sleep, laziness. And looking back towards the tall stone shelter with its wooden panelling and uncomfortable broad seat, Margot was recalled to earth by noticing a young man, presumably a clerk or shop-boy, kissing a girl, who might have been a domestic servant on her evening out. They remained for some minutes with their arms round one another—oblivious of time and place, absorbed. Margot watched them with interest, almost with envy. Love was an extraordinary mystery! She felt that it must indeed have all the magic that was claimed for it, if it could make two such down-at-heel individuals behave like that in that public place, and look so happy over it. . . .

She turned and walked back on to the gravel path,

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past the flower-beds, to the road. The thought came to her to call on Rachel, but somehow she felt disinclined to do this. Rachel had been so very firm about the "duties one owed to one's host," and had not seemed to approve of the visit to Carl Frensen which had precipitated matters. She compromised by going to the telephone-box at Lancaster Gate Station and ringing Rachel up.

"Can I see you for a moment or two?" she asked. "I may be going away to-morrow, and I should like to say good-bye before I go."

"My dearest," Rachel replied, "what can I do? I'm in the middle of dressing; I'm going out to dine and then to the play, and I'm already fearfully late as it is. Do come around in the morning, though, and tell me about it. It doesn't matter how early. . . ."

Margot put down the receiver and wondered what she had better do next. She felt unreasonably furious with Sir Carl for having encouraged her to embroil herself with the Falkenheims. It was all his fault. He had just made use of her to pursue his stupid quarrel. Oh, it was maddening! But what was she to do? If she rang up Levett or went to his house she took it for granted, in her crude Colonial way, that he would take an unfair advantage of her predicament and try at once to make love to her, to compromise her. Vernon she could not possibly consult. At all costs he must be prevented from knowing the truth about what had happened. Her heart almost stopped beating when she thought of Vernon. Her mortification was so intense that her face became drawn and white, as though through physical pain. But she would not let the cup be dashed from her lips like this. She would have him yet, in spite of Israel. Come what might, she would have him!

It was now after seven o'clock, and Margot's feeling

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of nervousness began to increase Where was she to go to spend the night? It would not do at all for her to go down to Dorsetshire at once and throw herself on Adam Henderson's mercy; nor could she have got a train so late. The Hendersons were her only hope now; if they failed her she would indeed be lost. She would have to play them carefully, in order that her willingness to visit them might appear in the nature of a condescension and that they should not guess the extremity in which she found herself. To arrange this meant staying a night or two somewhere in London. But where? Rachel couldn't have her, that was evident, and she knew nothing of London hotels. She did not even know whether it was possible for a single woman to stay in one alone. She thought of the Paddington Hotel, but it was horribly near Richbourne Terrace; then of the hotel at Victoria, but she remembered that friends of Vernon's sometimes stayed there. . . . Charing Cross somehow did not appeal to her, nor Euston. Without having ever seen it or realising in the least in what part of London it was situated, she hailed a taxi and told the man to drive her to St. Pancras.

Margot's heart sank when she reached the vast red pseudo-Gothic station, and for a moment she wondered if, at the hotel, they might refuse her admittance. They didn't do so, however. She was provided with a room and dined miserably in the great restaurant, after having sent one of the hotel servants in a taxi for her luggage. Soon after her trunks had arrived, she went upstairs to her bedroom, to escape from the disapproving eyes of wives of beneficed clergymen.

The utter bleakness and loneliness of the room struck a chill to her heart, and she knew that when she undressed and went to bed she would begin to cry. Luckily,

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she had a good deal to do first before she could allow herself to collapse. She had bought some plain note-paper, and proceeded to write first to Rachel, then to Vernon Stokes—heading her letters, as usual, "17 Richbourne Terrace"—to tell them that she was off to spend a few days in the country, as she was feeling rather tired. She added that she might possibly decide to prolong her stay, but that in any case she would write again to let them know. Then, having as it were burned her boats, she wrote a careful letter to Adam Henderson suggesting coming down to him on Friday for a short visit. "It's Wednesday to-day," she reflected, "and it means waiting here a whole day and two nights!" The thought appalled her, but she could see no other way out of the difficulty.

She took her letters down to be posted and returned to her desolate numbered bedroom, with its remorseless electric light and frigid bed. To try to sleep would be merely a farce. How could she live through the agonising suspense of the next two days? If she made one false move, what would become of her? Surely the good fortune which had brought her to the brink of success would not utterly desert her now in punishment for one solitary indiscretion! Oh, what a fool she had been—what a hopeless fool!

As she lay with her head on the hot pillow, turning restlessly from one side of her bed to the other, the thought of her recklessness and its results seared her like corrosive acid.

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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

Part II

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CHAPTER XII

MARGOT managed to fall asleep, after hours of nervous misery which seemed interminable, just before the dawn. She slept heavily until after nine o'clock. When she awoke she had a splitting headache, and felt in a state of thorough fright and dejection. The pattern of the wall-paper, the carpet, and the furniture of the room —so like a specimen bedroom in a big furniture store— made her shudder with nervousness. She was in an institution, was known by a number, and answerable to an impersonal management who was quite indifferent as to her fate. She longed at this moment for Rachel to come into the room and mother her. She would have enjoyed crying for a few minutes on Rachel's bosom and being kissed. She remembered that there was something comforting about Rachel's arms, just as there was something thrilling about Levett's. She felt utterly lonely. It was horrible to have to get up without help and to walk down a corridor to a strange bath; and when she went down to breakfast in the restaurant by herself she felt convicted as an adventuress—discovered. After breakfast she wandered out into the Euston Road. On the hot pavement drab-looking men and women jostled her. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry and to be out of humour. The faces she saw, even the carts and omnibuses, seemed different from the ones with which she was familiar, and the look of the hotels, standing back from the road at the end of dusty front gardens, which offered "Bed and breakfast" for 3s. 6d., was sinister and disquieting.

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She realised now how ignorant she was of London. Since she had been staying in Bayswater she had only seen a fraction of the vast town—just the few streets devoted to the rich. All around those streets there were unexplored regions, strange centres of activity into which she had never penetrated—intimate, ancient slums; the real London. As she walked on she passed a small grocer's shop at the top of Great Portland Street. Behind the counter, selling a quarter-packet of tea to an old woman with a black shawl over her shoulder, was a fair girl with good-natured face, shining nose, and an air of efficiency. She was not unlike a commonplace edition of Margot, and something about her riveted Margot's attention. She stood stock still and stared into the shop until at last the girl looked up and noticed her and stared back, aggressively—angry at the insolence of the wealthy-looking young woman outside who looked so prosperous in her well-cut coat and skirt and smart hat. Margot hurried on, confused, and ashamed of her bad manners. She kept saying to herself, "Have I sprung from that, and shall I sink back into it?" The fear of such a possibility made her clench her fists and walk more swiftly. She was a mystery to herself. She often wondered what it was in her that kept driving her on; what had made her so discontented with Price Street; what had enabled her to escape. Whatever it was, escaped she had, and there could be no going back. Her anger against Israel Falkenheim, against Carl Frensen, and with herself for her folly, surged up again in her heart and lent her the strength of ten. She would show Israel that she was not dependent on him; she would show him! She had come now to Regent Crescent, and looking to the left into Portland Place could almost see the Fawsett Vivians' front door. Good heavens!

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What ages ago it seemed to her now, that far-off dance! She did not want to go by the Vivians', but turned instead to the right, passing a row of sumptuous houses with glistening green front doors and cream-painted façades adorned with flattened columns. When she came to the gate of the Park she went in and began walking swiftly across its unknown expanses towards the canal. She did not know what to do with herself, but quick walking brought her relief by tiring her. As she crossed the most unromantic of London's parks, her thoughts luxuriated on the size and strangeness of London. For the greater part of her life, behind the counter in Price Street, she had dreamt dreams about London: and here it was. And for months past she—Maggie Carter—had been moving among the London nobs, the biggest swells in the whole world, just like one of themselves! She did not pursue this line of thought at present—it led round to painful actualities—but went back to the outward, visible characteristics of her heaven. She knew almost all the London monuments from picture postcards or from reading descriptions of them in novels, so that every inch of the great town had a glamour for her—a glamour that was still untarnished. She thought of going to see the Tower of London and the Tower Bridge, or possibly St. Paul's Cathedral. She had seen the Albert Memorial once when she had been driving to a party with Mrs. Falkenheim, and again one Sunday afternoon when they had all gone to a concert in the Albert Hall. She had also "done" Westminster Abbey; but she had never penetrated further east than Charing Cross. The mysterious "city" (that vulgar spot where all the money came from) was unknown country, and as she walked across Regent's Park the idea came to her to get into a cab and drive to Lombard Street to

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look at the banks. There was something about the very name of Lombard Street which went to her head. She had read somewhere that it was the richest street in the world, and she had an insatiable natural craving for everything that was superlative. She wanted to occupy the largest house in the greatest capital of the most important Empire on the earth, and she wanted to be the greatest lady in that capital—hence her interest in the biggest banks, where the hugest sums of money were kept, as it were, on tap. She visualised them as vast palaces in the classic style—veritable temples to the Money God—where rows of clerks sat before open drawers full of sovereigns into which they dug all day long with little copper shovels. And the drawers never got any emptier. Day after day the shovels would dig into the pile of yellow sovereigns, but the pile would in some mysterious way always be as large as ever. When night came, hundreds of lamps under green shades would shed light on miles of sloping mahogany desks where armies of clerks, sitting with leather-bound ledgers open in front of them, would add up the fortunes of the wealthy. How lovely it would be, she thought, to have a row of clerks employed in adding up one's money! She took from her bag the green slip which Israel Falkenheim had given her the day before, and noticed that the cheque was drawn on the head office of one of the most famous banks in the world, which happened actually to be in Lombard Street. This decided her, and she hurried out of the park at Hanover Gate, stopped the first taxi she came across, and told him to drive to Lombard Street.

She was not yet sufficiently *blasé* to have grown tired of driving about London even in the humble taxi, and whilst she was being hurried through the warm July air,

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amid the roar and dust of the great city, first of all down Park Road to Baker Street, then down Marylebone Road into Euston Road, past St. Pancras and King's Cross, then through a network of mean streets till the driver, not perhaps going the quickest way, came suddenly to Ludgate Circus, she forgot all about her anxieties in the sheer excitement of the drive. Whilst the cab, wedged in between motor omnibuses, drays, other taxis, and big lorries, went slowly up the famous hill, Margot found herself being introduced in the most thrilling manner possible to St. Paul's Cathedral. When at last the splendour of the great building, surmounted by its prodigious dome, dawned on her wide-open blue eyes, she found herself almost gasping for breath; her red lips parted as if to make an exclamation. She had never seen anything so magnificent, so grandiose, and yet so old. As she looked up at St. Paul's she realised for the first time that the English were a wealthy, powerful, dignified, and important nation centuries ago—long before anyone, except Dissenters and such like, dreamt of going to Canada or America. She sat in the cab obviously "at gaze," like the most naïve tripper, turning round to get the latest look. . . .

The turmoil of the cross-roads known to 'bus conductors briefly as "Benk"—where Royal Exchange, Mansion House, and Bank of England glare gravely across at one another, like three fat old merchants in a club—filled Margot with a fresh excitement. When she reached her destination, the famous thoroughfare, as narrow as a street of palaces in Genoa—with its dark and frowning stone buildings surmounted by heavy pediments and lighted by rows of unutterably serious windows—she was trembling all over. A commissioner in a top-hat with gold braid round it opened the heavy swing door of the

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bank for her. When she got into the hall, which was full of a subdued murmur like that of a congregation saying the Lord's Prayer in some vast church, Margot's knees knocked together with a delicious agitation. She advanced to one of the desks and handed over her cheque. The clerk took it, looked at it, and handed it back.

"This cheque is crossed, Madam, and can only be paid through another bank." He turned immediately to attend to someone else, without apparently noticing the blush which made of Margot one of the most delightful apparitions that had probably ever shed its radiance on the gloomy establishment since the date of its opening. The doorkeeper, an old soldier, was more susceptible than the clerk, and gave Margot a courteously admiring smile as he opened the door for her to go out.

Margot had a banking account of her own at a bank near Richbourne Terrace. Mrs. Falkenheim had taken her in there one day, soon after her arrival in London, and introduced her to the manager, who ever since had, as Margot put it, "nearly bust himself" with politeness. After she had lunched, which she did at an A.B.C. amid the furtive glances of rows of black-coated clerks and the haughty stare of pretty typists, she went to Bayswater on an omnibus and paid in her cheque. There was something soothing about the almost affectionate greeting of her favourite clerk which restored her peace of mind and gave her confidence.

On the whole, when she got back to the St. Pancras Hotel, she felt far more heartened to face its frigid solemnities than she had been when she started out. She had spent one of the most exciting days she could remember. It was altogether different going about by oneself from going about with Mrs. Falkenheim or even with Rachel or some man or other. Solitude had its

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charms, undoubtedly—if only it were a solitude that one could terminate at will.

The day's wandering had revived her latent love of adventure for its own sake. It amazed her how well she had succeeded in not getting into states of mind about her affairs. She had hardly given the Falkenheims a thought all day, nor Vernon, nor Sir Carl Frensen either. She had felt, curiously enough, a recurring temptation to ring up Levett, but she had enough native prudence to resist it. It was difficult; she felt sure he would be sympathetic. He would have restored her nerve; he was so strong and clever and cynical. Perhaps, if Adam Henderson let her down, she would reconsider things. But no; if that misfortune happened, Rachel would be the friend to whom she would turn. Rachel would, she felt sure, do anything for her; she was so kind and generous.

If the day had been attractive, the long hours between dinner and bedtime, and the still longer hours of the night, spent in a room that was now become almost unendurable to her, made up for it by their concentrated gloom. As she sat all alone in her wicker armchair in the solemn palm court of the hotel, her mind became a prey to a thousand anxieties. Supposing Adam did not reply; supposing Israel Falkenheim (whom she imagined to be capable of anything) intercepted his letter; supposing he took it into his head to write some wicked libel about her to the Stokes . . . ? It was not usually her way to invent misfortunes before they occurred, but her sudden change of luck, combined with the cheerlessness and loneliness of the great hotel, had strained her nerves almost to breaking-point. Another horror that came over her—a fear partly induced by the glances cast in her direction by almost all the men in the hotel

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who noticed that she was alone—was that if things went very badly she might not be able to "keep respectable." That seemed to her to be an appalling fate, not to keep respectable. . . .

She went early to bed and lay on her back with the window wide open, looking at the deep dark blue of the sky suffused with a golden glow from the arc lamps and the illuminated facias of the central streets. The roar of the traffic, softened by distance, sounded in her ears like the breakers of perilous but enchanting seas. And the more acutely she realised their perils, the greater became their enchantment. London, London! She would conquer her place in it somehow! She was conscious of being almost empty inside except for this all-consuming determination. She knew herself to be just a little girl with a pretty body, no money, and a precise ambition. Of love, even of affection, she knew hardly anything, and she had so little experience of disinterested kindness, was so unaccustomed to small exhibitions of good nature, tact, and feeling for others, that she either misinterpreted them or failed to notice them when they came her way. Her eyes were still hard and had a kind of fierce eagerness and alertness, like a hawk's. They suggested that she was constantly on the look-out for what could be turned to her advantage; and, had she not been so young and so beautiful, their expression would have lent something sinister to her whole personality. As she lay in bed, sleepless, all alone in the great hotel, and frightened, she began vaguely to realise her selfishness. For an hour or two her nerves seemed to snap, and she wept because she was so lonely and because she was a virgin and had no mother to help her. Her tears relieved the tension of her nerves, and enabled her at last to fall asleep.

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In the morning, as soon as she came downstairs, she went resolutely to the telephone and rang up the Falkenheims' house. She knew the post would have come and that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Falkenheim would yet be up. The footman answered her on the telephone. Yes, there was a letter for her, he replied. She noticed that he spoke with intentional uncivility; evidently the servants had guessed what had happened. She curtly told the man that she would send a messenger for the letter, and put down the receiver. When the boy brought the letter back she was waiting for him in the hall of the hotel and almost snatched the envelop out of his hand. Her face was quite white at first, but as she hastily glanced at the letter a blush of relief spread over her cheeks.

"My dear Margot," it ran, in Adam's niggling handwriting, "I was so glad to hear from you, as we were afraid you had forgotten all about us. By all means come down for the week-end, but we hope, as it is so near the end of the season, you will change your mind and pay us a good long visit. There is an excellent train leaving Waterloo at 12.37, and if you decide to catch this and will send a telegram we will send to meet you at Wareham. . . ." Margot did not bother to read any further. She turned and hurried to her room to pack her things.

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CHAPTER XIII

WITH the prospect of Adam really coming up to the scratch, of her plans succeeding, all Margot's nervousness vanished and she became her old buoyant self. She arrived early at Waterloo, lunched on board the train, and settled herself in the corner of her carriage to stare at the strange, park-like English landscape and to speculate about Kingsworth House and whether Mrs. Adam would prove a cat or a fool. At all costs she would have to propitiate Mrs. Henderson, whatever she was like. The idea of the rather down-at-heel and unsuccessful young clergyman whom she remembered being actually married and the headmaster of a boy's preparatory school amazed her, till she reflected that the changes which had come over her own conditions were no less astounding. And, after all, Adam had always been extremely canny, for a clergyman. He never, for all his sentimentality, could forget the main chance. Perhaps he had struck it "rich!"

As the train raced on, Margot made constant efforts to imagine what kind of household it was to which she was going. Sometimes she gloomily pictured a kind of Dotheboys Hall with ragged urchins sprawling about all the living-rooms, and Mrs. Henderson—blowsy and good-natured—mending torn "pants" and superintending the cooking; Adam even more unshaved and unkempt than he was in his Montreal days. Then it occurred to her that Adam could never have started a school unless his wife had money, and that the school might conceivably be a great success. She revised her ideas and now

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figured to herself a red brick villa, with airy rooms and a great deal of white paint, filled with well-washed little boys in neat uniforms. The train passed Winchester, and she asked a fellow traveler to point out the school to her, in order that she might have some idea of what a boys' school looked like. He showed her some rather new red-brick buildings, saying that they were "part of it," and confirmed her in her conviction that Kingsworth House would be a large, hygienic villa.

The train raced through the New Forest, with its straight green lanes and clumps of newly planted trees alternating with lovely pine woods, stopped at Bournemouth, then, after circling Poole Harbour, drew up in due time at Wareham.

With beating heart Margot got on to the platform with her hand luggage—eager, with all the eagerness of twenty-three, to meet fresh people, to progress, to push on, to mark a new stage in her career. The afternoon sunlight fell on her bright gold hair and made the clearness of her skin almost transparent. As she stood there with parted lips she looked like some soulless nymph. She had the lithe grace of an animal and behind the limpid china-blue of her eyes there was as yet no human depth or softness. She looked about the station for a moment, to see if Adam had come to meet her. They noticed one another simultaneously, and hurried forward smiling.

"Well I'm durned, Adam," was Margot's first exclamation after they had shaken hands with one another. "I shouldn't never have known you!" He had certainly changed out of all recognition since his Montreal days. His neck was inches fatter; his cheeks were like inflated air-pillows; his usually blue chin was shaved to perfection; a vague perfume floated from his hair. When

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he noticed Margot's glance straying from his highly polished top hat, to his superlatively brushed clerical frock coat and gleaming shirt-cuffs, he explained hurriedly that he had just come from a Ruridecanal conference.

"Well, I never did," said Margot, "we *are* a couple, aren't we! What d'you think of me? But you must tell me after we've got the grips on the rig."

It amused Margot to drop into the familiar dialect, in memory of old days, and she could see that it evoked a sentimental response in her companion. When the porter said very respectfully, "Will you 'ave them on the car, sir?" she pricked up her eyes. "Bet it's a Ford, though," she said to herself, distrusting her luck. In a few moments, however, she was being helped by a chauffeur, in a dark green livery, into a smooth-running Lanchester of which her already experienced eye could not but approve. She was longing to dig Adam in the ribs and ask him how he managed it, but what with the top hat and the cuffs and the Ruridecanal conference, she was afraid he might be going to take himself seriously.

The town of Wareham, enclosed within its steep grass ramparts, with its elegant Queen Anne residences built on the street, its grey churches and ancient bridge over the Frome, enchanted her. Then the car opened out along the straight, sandy road across the moorland, towards the low Purbeck Hills—in the midst of which Corfe Castle stood proudly on its knoll, with its crumbling old village clustering round its skirts. The castle seemed to raise its battered keep of Purbeck stone as defiantly now as in the days when gallant Dame Bankes defended it for King Charles. As she looked at it, magnificent still, even in its decay, Margot realised almost

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for the first time what "England" really meant, why it was that even the wasters out in Montreal had talked queerly about "going home." It was all so wonderfully long-established. These mournful and deserted moors covered with heather and gorse and broom had a charm for her that seemed to awake an instinctive craving in her own soul, unsuspected until that moment.

"We've got rather a nice old place at Kingsworth," Adam remarked. "I think you'll like it. It was in my wife's family, you know; she was born there, and so was her father."

Margot felt inclined to ask Adam all about his wife and where he met her; but, in view of these increasingly overpowering revelations of their joint magnificence, she did not dare to do so. Besides, Adam himself seemed a little overpowered, a little consciously on his best behaviour. He satisfied her curiosity later on, however, by remarking that he had first met his wife on board the boat on his return to England. She had visited America with her father, Colonel Blundell, in order to examine a new system of reclaiming youthful criminals, and it was their common enthusiasm for good works which had drawn them together. Margot remembered that Adam had always been great on clubs for street Arabs.

"They are useful things, those liners," she reflected. "The voyage gave him his chance to tell the tale, same as it did me with the Falkenheims!"

Kingsworth turned out to be a small village, built of Purbeck stone quarried from the neighbouring cliffs. It lay about a mile and a half from the sea, buried in a dell amid the green downs, sheltered from the winds. It was about four miles to the west of Swanage, and a little further from Corfe Castle.

The car slowed down as it traversed the narrow vil-

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lage street, and Margot watched the smiling faces of the cottagers on either side. Some of the women courtesied and the older men all touched their hats. She had never seen anything like that in Canada, or even in London (where the politeness of the lower orders was obviously paid for), and the spectacle gave her an exhilarating sense of power, of belonging to the "upper classes." In a few moments the car swung round to the left and entered a drive between two stone pillars, while a smiling woman held open the white gate. A minute more, and it had surged up to an imposing portico, and the chauffeur was helping her to descend.

Margot got a hurried impression of a long house built of grey stone, with rows of tall windows, the frames of which were painted white. Interspersed along its facade, between the windows, were flattened Doric pillars rising up to a highly ornamental classic pediment, and the whole house had a kind of solid and tranquil elegance. At the back a lovely wood sloped up the side of the hill and made a green setting for the mansion. In front was a wide lawn of rich turf ending in a cricket field, where a crowd of little boys were running about like animals in a cage. As Margot got out of the car she heard their shrill cries of "Thank you, sirrrr!" or "Heads there!" They were all dressed alike in white flannel shirts and grey flannel knickerbockers kept up by crimson scarves. To the left of the house was another lawn partly shut in by a box hedge, where two girls and two men were playing tennis. The shouting of the boys and the laughter of the young women in the tennis court seemed to blend with the brilliance of the roses and the geraniums in the flower-beds, the deep blue of the sky, and the vivid green of the smooth-cropped lawns, to

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make for Margot a complete picture of English rural delight.

The front door of the house, within the pillared portico, stood open, and just inside it was a white-haired butler, whose clear-cut, ascetic features made him look much more like a priest than his master. Margot could have hugged the man; she felt so happy. His name was Stanton.

Whilst Margot was being disembarrassed of her wraps, her hostess emerged through one of the square white doors which opened out of the hall. She had evidently just come in from the conservatory, for she carried three white gardenias and a pair of garden scissors in her hand. She greeted Margot with a mixture of friendliness and lack of ceremony that was almost off-hand—as though they had known one another for years. Margot was not accustomed to be taken as a matter of course like this, and reserved judgment.

They had tea in the drawing-room, a large room opening on to the garden, and she contrived to examine her hostess while pouring out small talk about her journey and her views of England, and of London.

Mrs. Henderson was a type altogether new to Margot. The only people who in the least seemed to resemble her were the Cornewalls, and even there the resemblance was slight. She wore a tweed skirt, very neat and highly-polished brown shoes, and a high-necked silk blouse. She had dark grey eyes, set under a broad white forehead, black hair, a straight nose, and noticeably firm mouth. Her whole expression was one of perfect self-control, of a high-mindedness which, but for a lurking sense of humour, might have been repellent. And, like a hospital nurse, there was about her something aggressively clean, as though she were washed all over with

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carbolic soap. Her brain, no doubt, was plentifully sprinkled with a kind of intellectual sanitas. Even her conversation was gently hygienic. She had an antiseptic glance; and Margot guessed that on her walks through her house she would contrive to leave behind her a trail of open windows. . . .

"I went down to the crèche this morning, Adam," Mrs. Henderson remarked to her husband, after the usual polite preliminaries were over and such questions as "What sort of a show did Harrow make this year?" had been put and answered. "The nurse has got to work splendidly," she went on. "There were six infants installed already, including Mrs. Joe Burt's new baby girl. Poor little mite! she will need no end of care, but Nurse quite thinks we shall pull her through. We have just started a little village hospital, Miss Carter," Mrs. Henderson continued. "It is principally intended for babies, but in practice we try to do what we can in all cases of sickness in the village, until the doctor can get round. I must take you to see the place to-morrow; we are tremendously proud of it, I can tell you! Kingsworth is almost the only village in Dorset where anything of the kind has been attempted. Of course, all our reactionary neighbours are just longing for the experiment to fail. . . ."

Margot encouraged her hostess to ride her hobby-horse, and, whilst continuing to use her eyes as hard as she could, endeavoured to act the part of the attentive and interested listener. She had learnt by this time to take a reasonable share in a conversation without paying too much attention to it, and whilst Mrs. Henderson recounted the village ailments to her husband—who, as Margot had to remind herself, was vicar of the parish—she had opportunities for studying the two

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people on whose goodwill her whole future seemed likely to depend. If the charm of their setting were anything to go by, she had evidently fallen, cat-like, on all fours. The lofty drawing-room with its elaborately ornamented ceiling, panelling enamelled white, polished parquet floor, and dark old paintings in heavy, gilded frames, amazed her by its quiet richness. It seemed such a much more "human" room than any of those in the Falkenheims' house, splendid as they were. Somehow the atmosphere was different.

Margot could see that the things in the room, though mostly old, were good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Yet they seemed all to fit in, as though each thing were prized rather for its associations than for its value in the sale-room. And to think that that down-at-heel young lead-me-to-glory Adam Henderson had secured all this for himself. How on earth had he managed it? She eyed him like a trade rival.

While they were drinking their tea and discussing the insanitary habits of the villagers, the tennis players finished their set, and came in through the open window, flushed and full of chatter. Margot looked at them with interest. The girls were very slangy. One of them was ugly and clearly over thirty, and much slangier than the young and pretty one. She had "unmarried" written all over her in such a queer, pathetic way that Margot wished she could get to know her in order that she might suggest emigration to Canada. The men turned out to be resident masters, and struck Margot as being remarkably like unprosperous editions of Adam. They talked about their games, drank their tea eagerly, showed a pretty deference to Mrs. Henderson, and seemed to have nice, gentleman-like manners. They wore white flannel shirts open at the neck, and were

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very boisterous and easy, and had neat toothbrush moustaches, which they pulled when they made remarks like, "By Jove! Miss Saunders, that was a topping backhander of yours in the last game. Never thought you'd get it!" And that was what most of their remarks *were* like.

Margot was pleased when Adam announced his intention of showing her the house and garden and took her off with him, leaving the tennis players to finish their tea.

The more she saw of the stately Georgian mansion, with its formal, rather solemn, elegance, the more it fascinated her. Its symmetrical garden front, with its circular portico, rows of flattened pillars, and heavy classic pediment, Margot had seen when she arrived. Adam now showed her the other side of the house, from which an older wing, lately renovated and now used as the boys' quarters, projected at right angles. Here there were orangeries and walled gardens, stables as big as a church and not unlike one in architecture, Fives courts under the hillside, conservatories, an electric-light generator, a laundry. Everything was in apple-pie order, freshly painted, and the whole establishment seemed to exhale an air of cheerfulness and success, of quiet dignity, cleanliness, and health. Margot hoped she would be able to lure Vernon into Dorsetshire during her visit. Here was her longed-for English background. To think that Adam Henderson of all people, whom she had always secretly despised and never more so than while she was living at Richbourne Terrace, should turn out to hold the keys of the situation! She recalled now that he had only cooled off her, in the Montreal days, after he had discovered that her father was a grocer. He had been the wary Scot even then; no doubt it was this

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national characteristic which had brought him success. Somehow her own qualities, as exemplified in someone else, struck her as being curiously unlovable. She began to have doubts about the correctness of her point of view. After walking through the gardens and talking to the old gardeners and taking a look at the boys playing cricket, who paused in their game to gaze in silent adoration at the pretty lady walking with "the head," they went back to the house, and Adam showed her the boys' airy dormitories, the schoolrooms, and the boys' dining-hall. As they went through a green baize door into the servants' quarters, Margot, who went first, heard a slight scuffle, and suddenly found herself confronted by a youth of about seventeen. He was handsome in an unwholesome way, with a pale face, dark, unkempt hair, and sullen eyes that had a smouldering fire in them. The pretty housemaid whom he had been kissing in a big glass-cupboard escaped with scarlet face and a comical air of outraged dignity. The boy stood, flushed and lowering, looking at Margot. Adam, who, either by accident or design, had just missed seeing Annie's embarrassed escape, introduced the youth, whose name was Lord Danbury. "What are you doing here, Danbury?" he asked, in a tone of voice which had a distinct note of the schoolmaster in it. "Why don't you cut along and have a game of tennis before dinner?"

"Oh, all right, Mr. Henderson," said Danbury, sheepishly, sloping off as quickly as he could. "But I'm absolutely fed up with tennis!"

"Is that one of your side lines?" Margot asked, with amusement.

"Yes," said Adam. "The young blackguard! Heaven only knows how I shall get him into Oxford or Cambridge. His parents are friends of Mary's people, and

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she offered to take him. She has done wonders with him already. . . ."

By the time Margot rejoined Mrs. Henderson she had elucidated one fact about Adam, and that was that, even if he had married her primarily for her money, his respect and admiration for his wife were genuine. And Mary Henderson's high-mindedness was of an awe-inspiring, incandescent kind. Somehow Margot never felt quite easy under her penetrating glance.

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CHAPTER XIV

MARGOT's first impressions of Kingsworth House were all enchanting, from the view from her bedroom window to the quince marmalade for breakfast.

"I sleep like a pig and feed like an ox," she wrote in her first letter to Rachel. "My room is just lovely, a white-flowered bedspread on the bed, white paint everywhere, and wide open windows letting in the whir of the lawn-mower and the yells of the little boys playing cricket. I can hear them shouting and running about in their dormitories as soon as I wake, and I was greatly shocked on the morning after my arrival to find, when I put my head out of my window, that I could see right into their bathroom! They were all having shower-baths and flipping each other's backs with wet towels—the wickedest little devils you ever saw! But, my dear, the view from my room and the sea air that blows in over the hill! You simply can't imagine how lovely it all is!" . . . "Mrs. Henderson does good works, but does not seem to be in the least pompous about them. She bathes with a boy called Lord Danbury, and me, and the doctor's daughter, every morning, just before luncheon. There is a kind of natural swimming bath at Durdle Ledge, which the sea fills at each tide, and it is only a mile and a half from the house. We walk there in our bathing gowns with coats on over them and towels slung over our shoulders. The boys bathe there three days a week. No breakfast in bed here, dearest! The whole household assembles at half-past eight. You can't imagine how

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lovely the constant fresh air is; my complexion looks quite different already!"

Margot's complexion, from the second day of her arrival, certainly gained a sudden new radiance. But the radiance started so palpably from the moment when she opened a certain envelope which waited by her plate on the breakfast table, that it is doubtful whether the ozone was entirely responsible for it.

"My dearest girl," ran the tonic letter, "I was so disappointed to get your note telling me you had slipped off down to the country without saying good-bye. I hope you won't prolong your visit, as you suggest is possible. The Heathcotes have a dance on the twentieth, and the Brackenbury's the evening after, both at the Ritz; and then, of course, there is Mrs. Falkenheim's dance on the twenty-third. I suppose you intend at least to be back for that, since surely she is giving it in your honour? Do give me the supper dances, Margot, will you? But I can't wait all that long time to know my fate! You are the only girl I have ever wanted to marry, and if you won't have me, life simply won't be worth living. I know I am not worthy of you, my dearest, but I swear I would make you a good husband. This is an idiotic letter, but I never was a good hand at letters. You can't think how flat everything is now you are away. Write and tell me when and where we can meet. I must have your answer, dearest, from your own lips.—Yours devotedly, VERNON STOKES."

When she had finished reading this outburst, which she knew that nothing but the strongest emotion could possibly have wrung out of Vernon's studious reserve, Margot's face blossomed into a smile of such perfect satisfaction that everyone at the table noticed it, and speculated as to the cause. He had proposed to her by

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letter; he had committed himself; it was for her to accept him or to reject him. Captain Vernon Stokes, son and heir of one of the wealthiest baronets in the kingdom was hers for the asking! Oh, it was too good to be true. But she must not be too elated. Some horrible stroke of ill-fortune might so easily dash the cup of success from her lips; Vernon might hear of something to her detriment from the Falkenheims and be put off by it. And yet, what after all, was the good of dwelling on gloomy possibilities? The glorious facts stared her in the face as she glanced at the letter in her hand. Vernon, after nearly a fortnight in which to "think better of it," still wanted her more ardently than ever to be his wife. . . .

With her great anxiety now removed, Margot was free to enjoy to the full the many attractions of life at Kingsworth House. She set herself at once to make friends with Mrs. Henderson, who on further acquaintance was much less disquieting than she had at first supposed, and revealed herself as possessing a singularly pure and noble nature, quite free from any virtuous harshness. From the average man's point of view, her absorption in "movements" for the good of others, and her unremitting altruism, were a little tiresome; but Margot did not find them so. Mrs. Henderson's unobtrusive ascendancy over the whole household, from the smallest of the schoolboys upwards, her energy, and the atmosphere of sunny chastity which surrounded her, all made a strong impression on Margot. She had liked very few of her own sex before, and admired none; but the personality of Mary Henderson touched her imagination and gradually came to alter her conception of women by increasing her respect for them.

Margot soon noticed that on no one was Mrs. Hender-

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son's influence exerted more beneficially than on the incorrigible Danbury. She adopted the only possible way of dissipating the leaden clouds of "sin" which surrounded him—that of making them ridiculous. From the moment of their first embarrassing encounter Margot had been signalled out for Danbury's glances—full of the ghastly gloom of youthful desire—and she strongly suspected him of having glued his eye to the keyhole of the bathroom door while she was taking her first tub. The episode of the assault on poor Annie in the glass cupboard, which Margot alone had observed, was characteristic of him. Apparently Annie was an old temptation for some days later Margot heard Mrs. Henderson chaffing the youthful *homme fatal* about her.

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Henderson, "your affectionate nature does you a great deal of credit. But if you feel so pent up with generous emotions, I think it is very ungallant to your hostess to lavish them on Annie." To Margot's astonishment and delight, Mrs. Henderson put her cool arm round Danbury's neck and hugged him as if he were a child of ten and she were his mother. "Now you feel better, don't you?" she said, with a laugh that had almost a cry in it. "And I am sure you will now be able to turn your attention to Plato's 'Apology' and get through your 'little-go.'"

Danbury's dark eyes burned as he looked at her, unable to speak. He slunk away sheepishly into the garden. Later in the afternoon, Margot noticed him cutting a bunch of roses; he seemed to be taking great care to cut them all of the same shade of dark velvety red. That evening, just before dinner, she noticed a bowl of these dark red roses standing on Mrs. Henderson's writing-table. . . .

The same night, as she went up rather early to her

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room, she heard two of the maids whispering together.

"That young feller, 'e's gone and got Joe Martin's daughter, the fair one down at the post office, into mos' awful trouble. Old Jo 'e do say as 'e'll tell Mrs. 'Enderson, 'e will." Poor Danbury—the incurable sentimentalist! Margot couldn't raise any sympathy for the horrid little fair-haired minx at the post office, who giggled and gave wrong change.

The school broke up in the last days of July, and there was a tremendous bustle in getting the boys off. Some were carried away by effusive parents, who arrived in cars and had to be invited to luncheon. Others were driven, chattering like magpies, in big brakes to Wareham Station. Piles of deal playboxes went off the day before the breaking-up, and on the last two days the boys seemed suddenly to be all over the house.

"Coo, I say, Miss Cartier, you *are* pretty; all the other chaps say so!" remarked a pink-faced urchin to Margot on the last morning. He had impudent brown eyes and a most engaging grin, and Margot felt curiously touched by his naïve tribute. On the whole, however, she was glad when the boys and the assistant-masters went away and she had an opportunity of seeing more of her host and hostess.

She had seen very little of Adam during the last days of term, but now he was able to go for walks with her while Mrs. Henderson was paying her visits in the village. They would go for miles over the hills, or sit in the sunshine on Durdle Ledge watching the little waves breaking over the rampart of rock in a joyous cascade of snow and feasting their eyes on the dark blue expanse of sea and sky. Margot enjoyed these walks. There was something about Adam which amused her, some quality in him which made her feel profoundly at ease.

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She thought him a humbug with his sanctimonious airs, but she could never be angry with him, because of the twinkle of humour which always lurked in the depths of his little clever eyes. And she admired his success, his luck, in having married a woman so infinitely "above" him, and the skill he showed in the management of his school. The prospectus of the school amused her particularly. Botany, Music, Woodcarving, the Violin, Singing, Dancing, and a whole string of other subjects were taught by "Visiting Masters," while young gentlemen were prepared for Oxford and Cambridge, the Army, and the Civil Services. Even Hebrew was in the "curriculum." "Who teaches the Hebrew, Adam?" Margot asked one day, "and where are all the visiting masters?"

"Well, their visits have been a little infrequent lately," Adam replied with a smile. "And as to the Hebrew element, we try to eliminate that as much as possible!"

"I believe you are as big a humbug as I am myself, Adam!" was Margot's comment. The prosperous clergyman beamed amiably and failed to give himself away.

"Do you know, Adam," she went on, suddenly confidential, "I have a young man? His name is Vernon Stokes, and he is a captain in the Guards—very good-looking, tall, neat moustache, good eyes and teeth, and terribly rich and important. I believe he thinks I am an heiress, or at least moderately well off. He doesn't *know* anything, thank heaven!"

Adam's fat face lit up with a smile of congratulation. "When is the marriage to be solemnised?" he asked.

"It won't be at all," said Margot, "not unless you buck up and help me fix it!"

"Beyond assisting at the ceremony, which I shall be delighted to do, my dear, I don't quite see how . . ."

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"Be my cousin . . . just for once," Margot asked, caressingly. They were sitting on the grass in a hollow under the shadow of Kingsworth Hill, looking across at the tiny Norman chantry on St. Aldhelm's Head and away over the changing, glittering sea. Adam was dressed in an old grey flannel suit and tennis shoes, and Margot was wearing an equally ancient cotton frock which she had brought with her from Montreal. Adam thought he remembered the frock, and as he smoked his pipe and looked at her—the "impressiveness" of his profession laid on one side for a moment—his thoughts took a sentimental turn. "My dear girl," he said, "how on earth can I be your cousin?"

"Oh, it's quite easy," Margot replied. "All Scotch people are related in some way or other, and my father and yours were both Scotch . . . therefore they must have been cousins!"

"But I thought you were a French-Canadian!" said Adam chaffingly. "And what could be a more distinguished name for a French-Canadian than Cartier? You had much better be descended from the great Jacques Cartier, the founder of Montreal, than be my cousin . . ."

Margot looked thoughtful for a moment. "I can easily be both," she said. "You can be my cousin on my mother's side. For all I know, her name was Henderson. She was an actress. Didn't you ever have any relatives who were actresses?"

Adam shook his head.

"Anyway, that doesn't matter," Margot went on. "Only the point is, the Reverend Adam Henderson, cousin of the bride, ought to 'assist' at Westminster Abbey or wherever the ceremony takes place. I've seen it scores of times in the *Morning Post,* haven't you?

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Besides, you and Mrs. Henderson would let Vernon come here and call, wouldn't you? If only the silly old father could come too—old Sir William, Bart.—it would be fixed up in no time. . . . Say you will be a cousin or an uncle to me, there's a dear!"

Adam's first impulse was to laugh; then he hastily pulled himself together and looked sacerdotal. But finally his humour got the better of him, and his solemnity broke into a smile. You must make the statements, then, Margot. All I can do is to try to avoid denying them. But what about Mary?"

"She's too much of a darling to suspect. We can let the information drop lightly, refer to it by inference as though it had always been understood. I'll manage it, trust me! All you will have to do is to admit it tacitly. I'll make it a *very* distant cousin, if you like, and as all Scotch people have hundreds of relations, no one will ever know!"

"Well, so long as I have nothing to do with it, you understand . . . I don't approve of it, mind, but upon your head be it. If you think it will do you any good. . . ."

"There, I knew you would be a cousin to me, Adam. I was *sure* of it! If you weren't so frightfully prosperous yourself, I'd offer you a ten per cent commission on my first year's salary. . . ."

"Margot!" said Adam severely, an unlooked-for wave of professional zeal and prejudice suddenly engulfing him, "I can't bear to hear you talk like that. If you don't genuinely care for the man, I won't be a party to anything so villainous as your marrying him just for what he gives you. Believe me, a marriage where the woman gets all and gives nothing is really less satisfactory for the woman than the man. Such marriages never turn

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out well. You had far better marry a man, even a comparatively poor man, Margot, whom you really like . . . if you want to be happy."

Margot was completely taken aback by this outburst. There was no hint of a smile at the back of Adam's eyes now. He was showing her a new side to his character. He meant what he said; and she was unable to understand how a humbug could also be perfectly sincere almost simultaneously. She remembered now that she had been impressed much in the same way when she heard him preach in the village church on Sunday morning. . . . She had expected it would make her laugh; but it had done nothing of the kind.

"My dear Adam, how silly you are," she remarked coldly, as though his rude words had torn the veil from her most sacred emotions. "Of course, I am utterly devoted to Vernon. You must be blind if you can't see that; but one doesn't want to shout these things on the housetops."

"Well, I'm more than glad," 'Adam remarked, as they walked back to the house over the springy, slippery turf of the downs. "I hope you will be extremely happy. He will certainly be a lucky man."

The priest had now given way once again to the sentimentalist, and the swift change—by lending her companion a certain quality of elusiveness—disconcerted her. She hated people not to live up to the labels she applied to them. But she had won her point.

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CHAPTER XV

VERY soon after her arrival at Kingsworth Mrs. Henderson had invited Margot to stay for a "good long visit," and a little later both she and Adam begged her again to stay with them for as long as she liked. Nothing could possibly have suited Margot better, and the invitation, in view of her harassing experiences with the Falkenheims, came as a godsend, and evoked from her one of her rare expressions of gratitude. Every hour she spent at Kingsworth added to her appreciation of the Hendersons and of their house. In the warm days of July and early August this green and sheltered corner by the sea seemed to her like Paradise; and after the hectic excitements of her three months in London the rest and quietness were just what she needed. She liked the bathing and the long walks, the big breakfasts, the fresh air, the rapturous, invigorating idleness. She enjoyed patronising the doctor's daughter and dazzling her with her elegant frocks; it amused her to make Danbury nearly ill through the excess of his admiration; and the more she saw of her host and hostess, the more she liked them. Adam went up several points in her esteem after he had consented to be her "cousin," on the day when she had taken him into her confidence about Vernon.

The routine of life at Kingsworth was pleasantly restful after London. Nearly every morning was spent in bathing or in sitting with a novel in her lap and a cigarette between her lips, watching the warm sea splashing in brilliant foam over Durdle Ledge. In the afternoons she would either go for walks with Danbury or Adam—to

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Chapman's Pool, where the coastguards had a hundred stories about smugglers to tell her; to Kimmeridge, with its quarries tunnelling far into the cliff; or round by Durlston Head into Swanage—or else play interminable games of tennis which lasted until the evening shadows made the ball almost invisible.

And after dinner would come the pleasantest hours of all, the quiet evenings spent by one of the open windows of the drawing-room, looking out at the dark violet-blue of the sky all jewelled with stars. Danbury would try, morosely, to flirt with her; Mrs. Henderson would work on tranquilly at her embroidery; and Adam would nod over a book until the spirit moved him to walk over to her chair and begin talking. Then they would all talk; Mary Henderson would join in, and they would discuss every subject under the sun until far into the night. Margot loved these evenings. They made her realise how much more interesting and attractive people are when you get to know them. It occurred to her that one could not get to know people in London; there was never time. But here you could explore other minds, learn things from them and about them.

The more Margot saw of Mary Henderson the more she respected and liked her, until at last her affection became almost like that of a schoolgirl for a mistress. It was chiefly at night that they had opportunities for long talks, for Mrs. Henderson had a thousand good works to occupy her during the day. She spent hours in the village, where everyone loved her, asking the sick about their ailments or supervising the new crèche which had proved such a success. The villagers had known "Miss Mary," as they still called her, ever since her earliest childhood, and had always loved her, not only for her own sake, but for her father's. Old Colonel Blundell had ruled his

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tenants with a firm hand, but he had looked after them. No one in Kingsworth had ever been in actual want; no sick person had suffered from a lack of proper nursing or medical treatment. The tradition of responsibility had descended to Mary Henderson, and as her "good works" came to her quite naturally, the villagers never thought of them as interference. Sometimes Margot would accompany her hostess on her rounds, and she grew to love the dour villagers with their strange ways, their peculiar delicacies and courtesies. The old women would pour out the simple story of their ailments and their worries to Mrs. Henderson, going into intimate details without a trace of embarrassment. And Margot, finding that her companion was entirely unshocked, gradually realised that vulgarity is never an attribute of things which are natural and universal, though it may be (and often is) inherent in a description of them. She could see, however, partly through intuition and partly through noting their effect on her companion, that there was nothing vulgar or essentially coarse in the things these countrywomen said. Even the bawdy old songs in the Dorset dialect, with which they sent their babies to sleep, had a simplicity and a sincerity which seemed to take away from them any suggestion of uncleanness.

The village of Kingsworth was curiously rich in characters. Almost every grey stone cottage in the one long street of which the village consisted was inhabited by a couple who differed essentially from their neighbours. They were not "all of a pattern," like the inhabitants of Richbourne Terrace. One afternoon, Mrs. Henderson took Margot with her to visit John Vile, who was reputed to be the holiest man in Dorset. He was over seventy years old, quite deaf, and had but one eye. He lived in a tiny cottage with his niece Rosie. Rosie was a neat

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and clean young widow with smiling face and gay brown eyes. She pursued the oldest of professions—or the profession perhaps pursued her—but she did it because she "never could stand up against a man." She was, in truth, a man's woman; and if any male thing near her hurt himself, or was in want of her embraces, or even of her beer and bread and cheese, she was miserable if she could not give them. Her heart would melt at the sight of a fine upstanding young man. Her love of men bred in her such a sweet courtesy that it was a delight for anyone to go to her cottage. Even the doctor, a gnarled recluse of antiquarian propensities, who took the gloomiest views about the human race in general, could never quite bring himself to disapprove of Rosie. As for John Vile, he would sit all day in his chair, occasionally smoking, and always deep in divine meditation. His one bright blue eye had never perceived his niece's frailties, nor would it have been turned on her accusingly if it had. When Mrs. Henderson came to bring him his tobacco and to inquire after his rheumatism, he would lift up his head and nod it in motions of courtesy before turning on her his brilliant orb. This blue, liquid, fiery eye fascinated Margot. It was just the same colour as her own eyes; but it had a strangeness in its depths that held her, just as the Ancient Mariner held the Wedding Guest. It was as though a young, eager soul—filled with some holy satisfaction or possessing some divine secret—were looking through it. No one who encountered John Vile's peculiar gaze could think of him as old. In the village his wisdom was famous, and it was well known that he saw visions. The fact that he had seen the local Baptist preacher come up the street surrounded by "seven lean black dogs with gert tongues, leaping and slavering," had sealed the fate of that individual so far as Kings-

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worth was concerned. Adam Henderson, however, had been accompanied by "six lily-white meäids, all a-playing on sackbuts and psalteries, with fire to their boosums and to their feet: holy meaïds." John had seen these meaïds at communion time, standing on either side of the priest. The taking of the sacrament was the great event in his life, and Sundays were radiant for him. "It du shine strangely, the bread—all with white light—and I du hear sweet crashings of brass. 'Tis them cymbals I du hear a-playing in Heaven." Rosie would accompany Uncle John in order to help him up the aisle to the altar rail. She liked the nice sweet wine the vicar handed to her, accepting the sacrament as a child accepts something not understood, about which its curiosity has not been aroused. Occasionally she would think about the "poor dear Man" who had to die on the Cross and whose women had been unable to save Him pain. It was characteristic that the part of the Bible story which most affected her was the fact that Mary, Christ's mother, and the other Mary had been powerless to sacrifice themselves to save Him from His sorrow. For a woman not to be able to bear a man's troubles for him and ease his pains struck her as being a dreadful calamity. She understood the anguish which those holy women must have endured as they wept over the feet of the crucified Jesus. Rosie was indeed of a thoroughly practical and kindly habit of mind: she left "the 'igh thinking for them as could do it."

The female counterpart of old John Vile was Mrs. Isaac Holden, who kept house for her son in a bleak cottage on the Kingsworth House estate, which stood in a hollow in the cliff-side, not far from Chapman's Pool. The son was a handsome young quarryman who worked at Kimmeridge. He had never married, because of his

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passion for Rosie. His family traditions prevented him from wedding a "little huzbird," yet Rosie held him fast. Mrs. Holden, whom the neighbours were apt to describe as a "regular wold chattermag," was rather corpulent and unable to move about very much. She would sit for hours at the door of her cottage in her armchair supported by bright red cushions, with a grey shawl round her shoulders. Her white hair was surmounted by a neat linen cap, and she wore a large cornelian brooch on her bosom. The chief peculiarities of Mrs. Holden's appearance were the pinkness of her cheeks, her cheerfulness, and the fact that one of her eyes was dark blue, the other brown. She spent most of the day listening to the music of a canary, which, she was convinced, had in some mysterious way got right into her head and had remained there caged. When Mrs. Henderson and Margot visited her, her face would light up with a beatific smile; she would nod her head slowly up and down, and, raising one gnarled finger, would say: "Listen, dearie, it's singing now, it's singing now!" The canary was the one great interest of her life, her one topic of conversation. Sometimes, on her more wandering days, it transformed itself into a choir of angels, and her satisfaction became still greater.

The charm, to Margot, of the Kingsworth villagers lay in the distinctness of their personalities. There was, for instance, old Mrs. Holden with her canary in the brain and her odd eyes; Rosie the "gert strumpet," for whom no one had a hard word; and the saintly John Vile, her uncle. Then again there was the village miser, William Beeney, who, in spite of a bag of sovereigns buried in a safe place, made constant efforts to get into the "house," and lived on old crusts of bread and stolen potatoes; and the village spendthrift, young Farmer

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Dabinett. Dabinett wore a suit of checks, a mustard-colour fancy waistcoat, and a stock adorned with a gold tie-pin representing a fox's head. He had been to London—with adventures of a lurid character in Leicester Square—and at thirty was already bibulous and half-ruined, while his amours were a parish scandal. Mrs. Henderson told Margot that it was well known to antiquaries that Jo Dabinett had some of the most illustrious blood in Europe in his veins. He was a direct descendant of the knightly De Albini's, the flower of mediæval chivalry, whose lands had formerly extended far into the county of Somerset. Both "simple faith" and "Norman blood" were therefore to be found among the inhabitants of Kingsworth. There was no tedious uniformity about them; nor did long lives passed within the narrow confines of the village seem in any way to limit their originality or interest.

Margot realized at once that but for Mrs. Henderson's illuminating commentaries she might never have had the wit to see below the surface.

Mrs. Henderson had a way of opening up fresh vistas for the mental eye. She knew her villagers better than they did themselves, and her comments to Margot were revealing and suggestive. She seemed to have the knack of making them interesting through her own intense interest in them. This absorption in the lives of others was, to Margot, a new and fascinating quality. She had never tried to understand other people before, except as a protective measure against fraud; never realised that it was possible to become interested in anyone except oneself. She had only thought about people hitherto in relation to her own personal advantage, or in regard to their social standing. Somehow since she had been at Kingsworth she had completely forgotten about "social

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standing." The household in which she now lived did not bother itself about that kind of thing. Margot began slowly to realise that there were other things in life, and that people actually existed in the world whose behaviour and attitude were not governed by ideas of profit or advancement but by abstractions, religions, codes of honour, loves and hates. And she realised that these abstractions were the only things that really mattered to Mrs. Henderson, and even, though perhaps in a less degree, to Adam. Adam, whom she imagined she knew thoroughly, was becoming more and more an enigma to her. As the days went by she came to believe that those parts of him which she understood—his snobbishness, his care of appearances, his "humbug"—were only small parts of him, the rotten parts. She realised after a while that, although by the side of his wife he seemed a pompous sham, there was really something in him. He had loved where money was—and social position as well—but he had loved. His respect and affection for his wife were as sincere as were hers for him. And in spite of his weakness for "swanking" at county garden-parties, or for handing the cake at meetings of "influential church-women" engaged in fatuous movements, it was obvious that he sincerely believed in the religion he was engaged in teaching. Though his prospectus was full of titled referees and his curriculum contained subjects which there was no one qualified to teach, he yet ran his school admirably, did his very best by his little boys, and was extremely successful with them. No: Adam was bafflingly complex. He had as keen an eye to the main chance as she had herself; but there was in him a "something beyond" which she felt she lacked. He certainly had not been like this during the Montreal period—unless the difference was that in those days she had been too

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dull to perceive it. Perhaps it was his wife's influence? Mary Henderson would influence anybody, and already, when she had known her barely a month, Margot felt that she was being influenced herself. It was sheer personality that did it; Mary never laid down the law or attempted to persuade anybody to do anything. She never suspected evil; and her way of taking the best in everyone for granted produced an immediate response. Without realising exactly how she had gained her knowledge, Margot knew instinctively that Mary Henderson would always preserve a confidence, was incapable of reading a letter not addressed to her, or of being unfaithful or even disrespectful to her husband, and that she would always fearlessly do what she believed to be right, no matter what might be the worldly consequences. When Margot debated in her mind whether she should tell Mary Henderson about Vernon, she always came to the conclusion that it would be safer to say nothing. She was afraid her ambitions—about which she had begun to have her doubts—might betray themselves if she confided her secret. She knew so well what Mary Henderson would think about them, and about a mercenary marriage. . . .

Margot heard frequently from Vernon, and the eager tone of his letters showed her that she could afford to be careless in her replies. She was quite certain that now, with a little management and skill, she could land him whenever it suited her to do so. But the question was: Did she really want him? Was it all worth while? Until recently her thoughts of marriage had been connected exclusively with her selfish, worldly aspirations. A rich husband would bring her power and freedom; fine clothes, luxury, social success. In the hurry and excitement of her life in London, surrounded as she had been,

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at the Falkenheims, by an atmosphere of refined materialism, it was not unnatural that her thoughts should have been filled with ideas of this kind. Here, however, it was all different. The blue August days were leisurely and tranquil. If she liked, by shaking off Danbury, who seemed to watch her every movement, she could be all alone for a whole day. Sometimes she would go off by herself, taking sandwiches for luncheon and a novel, and sit alone with her thoughts in some sheltered sun-bathed crevice of the cliffs. She loved the sea with its mysterious changing colours, loved the "many-twinkling smile" of the waves on the white sand. She was happy as she sat thus, with the rugged cliffs stretching far away to right and left of her, eating her food out of a paper packet or smoking one of Danbury's cigarettes; she was happier than she had ever been since the days when she and Loo had played together among the peach-trees on the shores of Ontario. In these days of solitude she began not so much to know herself as to realise that she had a self to know. She thought often of Vernon, and (rather to her own perplexity) more often still of Godfrey Levett. Her determination to marry Vernon remained unshaken, but she began to wonder whether marriage would give her all that she anticipated, whether it would not take away from her as much as it gave. . . .

The facts of human existence, in the village, were so much less veiled than they were in London. Margot had always, all her life, resented liberties being taken with her body. The idea of having to surrender herself to any man's physical subjection was revolting to her; and Vernon, for all his air of refinement and reserve, was not, in any case, the man she would have chosen. And all that she had seen of child-bearing since she had

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been at Kingsworth frightened and horrified her. Once when she had been walking down the village street with Mrs. Henderson she had heard a woman in a cottage moaning in agony. And yet she knew that the greatest sorrow in Mrs. Henderson's life was that she had no children. . . . Her friend would have given anything to suffer that anguish! She could see that there must be something wanting in a marriage if one had no children. To have a nice little girl to bring up would be an occupation—something to think about. But, on the whole, the idea of the physical side of marriage—about which, for all her apparent sophistication, she was essentially ignorant—disquieted her, and made her feel unhappy. She could not put the subject out of her mind; and many times it was on the tip of her tongue to ask questions of Mary Henderson. She felt the need of confiding in some married woman who would comfort her. Rachel Elkington must, she felt, be as ignorant as she was herself. And the time was short. She felt the shadow of the coming events brooding over her. She knew that these quiet weeks were like a lull before the storms of experience burst over her head, and that if she did not make the most of them the opportunity would be for ever gone. But she did not know where to turn, and when she looked into her own heart she could not read what it had to tell her. . . .

One morning towards the end of August she found a letter from Vernon on the round oak table in the hall, when she came down to breakfast.

"My dearest Margot," it said, "great news! I am coming down next Monday to spend September with the Heathcotes, who live just outside Wareham. I believe that is quite close to you, and I hope we shall meet. I mean to come over to call on the first available after-

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noon, so please write to say you will be pleased to see me. It has been too boring for words in Scotland with you so far away.

"Love, from your devoted

VERNON."

She felt a sinking in her heart when she had taken in the contents of the letter. He was coming to Wareham on Monday! If only she could have had just one more month.

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CHAPTER XVI

MARGOT was sitting in a hammock slung in the dark, cathedral-like shade of the beech wood which clothed the lower slopes of the hill between Kingsworth House and the sea. The wood was very silent, very cool. The sunlight, filtering through the leaves, made patterns on the ground, and little plots of bright light alternated with and accentuated the green gloom. The hammock was slung between two young trees at a point where the wood was less thick, and, though shaded from the sun, Margot could see its rays pouring down on the patch of luxuriant vegetation close to her feet. By turning her head she could also look far along the solemn aisles of the wood's recesses, where the sun could not penetrate and where the footsteps of man and beast were noiseless on the beech-mast. This particular spot was one of her favourite retreats when she was too lazy to walk as far as the sea. To-day she had come here because she expected Vernon, and because she wanted to be alone until he arrived and yet to remain near at hand. She treasured these last moments of loneliness. All her life, perhaps, from now onwards, she would live constantly surrounded by others. Even her bed she would have to share. Always, always she would have to keep up appearances, to make conversation, to conceal her feelings, emotions, thoughts. Never again, once she married, would she have any more privacy. As she lay stretched out in the hammock in the warm greenness of the wood she wished that she could postpone everything for just a little longer. . . . To rest and dream in this tranquil

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paradise, that was enough. She felt that her whole nature, since she had been at Kingsworth, had changed. She had discovered things in her life which she never knew existed. . . . They made her uneasy—dissatisfied with the future she had marked out for herself, and from which she felt she could not now go back.

"Are you there, Miss Cartier? . . . Miss Cartier!" It was Danbury's morose, growling, boyish voice which aroused her from her reverie.

"Here I am, in the hammock!" she called out in reply, and in a few minutes Danbury stood in front of her, devouring her with his eyes. He was dressed in an old pair of flannel trousers with a white canvas shirt, open at the neck to reveal a sunburnt chest, and had a pair of dirty buckskin tennis shoes on his feet. He stood before Margot, eyeing her all over with furtive admiration. 'There's a feller turned up in a car," he said at last. "He's come for you, I think. Sort of a soldier with a bit of a moustache and a doggy manner. He's doing the 'heavy' now to Mrs. Henderson and Adam. You don't want to rush off and see him yet, do you?" he added persuasively, blushing at his own boldness. He sank down on the long grass by the side of the hammock and grasped one of Margot's hands. Margot felt flattered by the emotions of this dark-eyed scamp, but in spite of his extreme youth he alarmed her. He was apparently so inflammable that there was no knowing what he would do next. Before she could answer him or send him away he had leapt to his feet and was kissing her furiously.

"Danbury!" she cried. "Shut up, you little beast!"

He held her so firmly that she could hardly move. She could hear his heart thumping. The hammock swung and creaked until—the rope being already half-

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worn through—it finally gave way, and Margot and her admirer came heavily to the ground. This was too much for her good nature, and, wrenching herself free, she boxed Danbury's ears as hard as she could.

"You darling!" he said, looking at her with admiration, and submitting to her blow without moving a muscle. He stood with drooping head and rounded shoulders looking up at her with eyes full of glowing fire. "Do hit me again!" he said. "Bully me. I wish you would!" She made as if to strike him a second time, but her hand dropped, and her sense of humour getting the better of her, she went off into a peal of laughter. Then, picking up her novel, brushing the twigs out of her skirt, and removing the disorder which Danbury's embraces had wrought in her hair, she walked back with him to the house.

"He's a lucky devil, that's all I can say!" Danbury remarked when they caught sight of Vernon in the distance, standing talking to Mr. and Mrs. Henderson. "Just like those beastly soldiers! Stuck-up asses!" When they got nearer Danbury evaporated in the direction of the servants' quarters, to show one of the gardeners his latest Paris photographs.

* * * * *

"You've been very prompt in keeping your word," Margot remarked when she was alone with Vernon after luncheon.

"Yes. Didn't you expect me to be prompt? If you only knew what I know, you wouldn't wonder."

A smile, like the smile which the Jew endeavours to repress when he has just got the better of the Christian, spread over Margot's face. Vernon described it to himself as the "love light," and his heart swelled inside him with happiness. She really cared! He touched his

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moustache to restore himself to his attitude of cynical unconcern.

"Awful jolly place this," he remarked, to relieve the tension. "I came here once, as a boy, in Colonel Blundell's time. Mrs. Henderson didn't remember me. No reason why she should have done, of course."

They walked up through the beech wood and on to the hill. From the top of it, turning their backs on the sea, they looked down on the grey mass of the house, with its classic elegance and beautiful proportions, standing amid its wonderful English lawns, close-cropped and vivid, and bordered with roses. The rooks circled cawing round the tops of the trees—the friendly rooks.

"It's a jolly place, isn't it?" Margot said. "My cousin is lucky."

She felt Vernon's glance rest on her for a moment through his dark, beautiful lashes.

"By Jove, yes," he agreed. "Kingsworth is one of the finest places in the county."

She turned away and they walked slowly over the crest of the hill, talking of London and of their friends—of the Fawsett Vivians and the Hollingtons, of Patcham and Joyce, and the Elkingtons and Godfrey Levett.

"I met Levett in Scotland," Vernon remarked. "Instead of doing any shooting, he went for interminable walks by himself round the shores of the loch. Touch of the mystic about that fellow, I think. The artistic temperament, I suppose. He is a very interesting man, though," he added quickly, in his character of literary amateur.

Margot drily agreed, suppressing a desire to giggle, and they went on talking once more about the season's dances.

"Do you know," Vernon remarked suddenly, "I called on your friends the Falkenheims a few days after you

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had gone. The atmosphere seemed positively arctic, and they glared at me when I mentioned your name. I suppose they were jealous because you rushed off to stay with your relations and left them in the lurch over their dance?"

"It wasn't exactly that," said Margot. "You see, Mr. Falkenheim and I had a difference of opinion." Vernon nodded his head solemnly, with an air of precisely understanding what she meant, which would have misled anyone who knew him less well than Margot did. She paused for a moment, wondering what she had better say. Then, deciding that the safest plan is always to carry the war into the enemy's country, she remarked, "You see, Vernon, Mr. Falkenheim thought his position as my host gave him certain privileges . . . and I didn't think so. So I came away rather quickly. That was just what happened."

Vernon grew pink under his bronze, and Margot noticed the effect of her words on him with an amazed and gratified curiosity. "Filthy old brute," he hissed through his moustache. "These beastly Jews make London intolerable. We teach them to behave themselves in public, and to wash, and all that kind of thing . . . but whenever they get half a chance. . . ."

Margot felt once more a dangerous desire to laugh, but she was magnanimous instead. Slipping her arm through Vernon's with a movement of friendliness and trust, which again sent the blood to his head, she remarked: "Now that is quite enough about the silly old Falkenheims. He was very kind to me, after all. And we should never have met if it hadn't been for him. So don't let us refer to them any more! Isn't this air delicious?" They walked along to the cliff overlooking Chapman's Pool and sat, with their legs hanging over

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the edge, looking down at the rock-girt bay, so wild and beautiful in its loneliness. "This is the loveliest place I have seen in my whole life," she said—with perfect sincerity—"and I should like never to have to leave it."

"You would soon get sick of it in the winter," Vernon remarked with irritating literalness. "You would want London then!"

As they walked back through the wood to Kingsworth House, Margot knew that he would try to kiss her if he could do it without being too commonplace, and that he was longing to ask her for her reply, and if it was "Yes" to marry her at once. But she did not want him to ask her too quickly. She determined to prevent him if she could. She knew that if he did it walking through a wood on an August afternoon he would try to be clever about it, would attempt an epigram or some peculiar trick which should emphasise his original point of view. At the moment when she said "Yes" to him, she wanted to be like all the other girls in all the novels she had read. She wanted moonlight and a trembling male voice whispering "Dearest," followed by an amorous languishing against a white shirt-front. Perhaps she would have the same emotions as everyone else if it happened like that. There would be the perfume of the roses to go to her head, and the tobacco plants in the West Garden would open their pale white blossoms and gaze at her. Her visualisation of the scene was so vivid that she could feel in imagination the coldness of the shirt-front against her breast. . . . In about a week's time, or possibly in ten days or a fortnight, she felt she would be ready for her third act.

"How long are you going to stay at the Heathcotes'?" she asked.

"Oh, a few weeks, I expect," he replied, adding naïvely, "or perhaps until you send me away!"

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"Why should I send you away?" she said, hanging her head a little and turning away from him.

"Well, I think you are cruel enough for anything, my dearest!" he whispered, slipping his arm through hers. "Isn't it a bore?" he went on, in his normal conversational voice. "I shall have to run over to Highmere—that's our place in Surrey, you know—either to-morrow or the day after. No sooner had I arrived and settled down than Mrs. Heathcote brought me in a telegram from the Guv'nor. Particularly wants to see me about something. Hopes I can make it convenient to run home for a night! It is not in the least convenient."

"What is it he wants to see you about?" Margot asked, white to the lips.

"I simply haven't a notion. He always takes a most uncomfortable interest in my affairs. I suppose he wants to haul me over the coals about something. But don't let us talk about him, Margot," Vernon said. "Let us talk about *us*! We shall be sitting having tea in your cousin's drawing-room in ten minutes' time discussing Shakespeare and the musical glasses. You haven't said if you are glad to see me."

"And I haven't ever said you might call me Margot," she replied coquettishly. They stopped simultaneously and stood looking at one another in the shadowy stillness of the beech wood. She was wearing a diaphanous white dress, which allowed the rounded fulness of her breast to be divined, and at the same time emphasised her radiant youth. Her sudden pallor of apprehension had given way now to a delicate flush, which extended even to the back of her neck. Her bosom was troubled; she seemed all at once deliciously ill at ease.

Vernon was unable to speak with emotion, and stood looking at her, pulling his moustache. He knew, as he

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thought, the signs of conquest so well. He could not be mistaken! Yet, since his affection for her was the sincerest feeling which he had yet experienced in his life, he remained tongue-tied. At last passion gave him spontaneity, and he took her in his arms and let his lips rest on her forehead. "My dearest girl," he said hoarsely, "you don't know how I adore you!"

"Don't, Vernon!" she cried. She used his Christian name caressingly, and the sound of it sent thrills down his spine. "I wish you hadn't done this. We were good friends before. I'm not the kind of girl you think I am. I can't explain. But these sort of things *mean* something to me. . . ." She wondered if she had said too much or too little; but the news about his father's telegram spurred her to take risks. "I daresay you think I'm just a flirt, but I hate insincerity," she went on. . . .

Vernon's hold on her did not loosen, and she experienced a certain sense of well-being that was partly elation, partly a physical satisfaction. Vernon's reply was inarticulate.

"You little witch," she thought he said. "You know you've got me bound hand and foot. I haven't had a moment's peace since that evening at the Vivians'. I love you, I love you, I love you! . . . Don't say you won't have me. I'll make you. I've got you, and I won't give you up. . . . Say you care just a little. But I don't believe you do. You are as hard as stone."

A note of abject misery crept into Vernon's voice when he complained of her hardness.

"I'm not hard, Vernon," Margot whispered. "If you only knew!"

Suddenly she found herself crying—she knew not why in the very least, unless her tears were caused by relief after intense anxiety—but she was aware that it was an

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excellent thing to be doing. Vernon kissed her wet eyes, murmuring incoherent endearments, and then his lips sought hers in an anguish of love. She yielded her mouth to his, and her body became limp in his arms. . . . "Dearest," he said, "when will you marry me? What is there to wait for? You *do* care for me, don't you?"

She looked up at him with eyes that were softened by her tears. "You ought to know," she whispered, and when she had said the words she watched, with mingled fascination and alarm, the expression which came over his face. He was like a man transformed, transfigured. All his mannerism had dropped from him. He seemed years younger and nicer; curiously simple. And suddenly she realised his beauty, as he stood watching her all on fire with passion. His crisp brown hair waved over his forehead; his fine hazel eyes glittered through his long lashes; his bronzed skin was clear and healthy. She noticed what narrow and yet strong wrists he had, noticed the ripple of his muscles under his thin summer clothes. And she liked the way his hair grew from the back of his neck. And she had got him, got him for good! . . .

They walked on slowly, hand in hand, like children. Then Vernon stopped and took her in his arms again and kissed her. "My dearest," he said, "when will you marry me? You will marry me, won't you?"

"If you *really* want me to, Vernon," she replied simply. "But don't let us have a fuss about it, my dear," she added. "I'm not like other girls. I should just hate a great function." It was bitter to Margot to have to say this, but she knew the longer she delayed things the more opportunities she would give Sir William.

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"I am so glad to hear you say that, Margot," Vernon answered. "That means we can be married at once, doesn't it? And tell everyone about it when it is all over?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Margot, lifting her face again to be kissed. "But I say, my dearest boy, we shall make ourselves conspicuous if we don't hurry up. Tea must be nearly over!"

"Come on then, let's run," laughed Vernon. For a moment he looked like a young god, and as they hurried joyously through the wood and across the lawns to the house, Margot thought she liked him far better than she had ever expected. Her great contentment irradiated her face and made her eyes shine with happiness.

"Adam, they are in love, those two," whispered Mary Henderson to her husband, as they stepped through the open window into the drawing-room where the tea was already nearly cold.

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CHAPTER XVII

As Vernon steered his car along the drive leading up to West Frome House, after his visit to Margot, Mr. and Mrs. Heathcote walked across their lawns to meet him. Mrs. Heathcote, who was a cousin of Vernon's mother, was stout, and walked with the aid of an ebony walking-stick. She had shrewd grey eyes, a pretty, old-fashioned trick of gesture and the reputation for a caustic wit. In her youth she had been a noted beauty, and was credited, in local legends, with having moved in those famous "fast" circles of the eighteen-seventies where royalty played baccarat. She herself neither denied nor confirmed these rumours. She lived quietly and contentedly with her tall, white-moustached husband, who farmed some of his own land, was a keen supporter of the hunt, a Justice of the Peace, and whose hobby was the breeding of a certain kind of spaniel. Ronald Heathcote belonged to a respectable club in London, which he rarely visited, and to the London Library, from which institution large books about dogs or about the latest American methods of scientific farming were sent to him periodically and devoured in his den over interminable cigars. His days were fully taken up with occupations which would have seemed of infinitesimal importance to second-rate minds. He was content to fill his allotted place in life, and considered it his duty to accept its responsibilities whilst enjoying its pleasures. He desired no other habitation than the small Elizabethan manor house, built of grey Purbeck stone, which had been for generations in his family, and the fabric of

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which his wife's fortune had enabled him to restore. He believed with the Psalmist that his lot had been cast *in bello campo,* and he was grateful and without ambition.

As he walked over the lawn with his wife, in the clear light and lengthening shadows of the late afternoon, he experienced a vague feeling of irritation against Vernon. He liked young men to be a little less highly varnished; to have a certain fine roughness about them.

"You know, John, he has some *affaire du cœur* in our neighbourhood, otherwise he would never have come down to stay with us at the end of August!"

Vernon waved his hand when he saw his hosts, smiling at them boyishly and showing his beautiful teeth. He took the car round to the garage himself and then joined them on the terrace to watch the peacocks being fed. Somehow the view from the terrace across the valley of the Frome, with the symmetrical phalanx of elm trees on either hand and the blue Purbeck hills in the distance, had never before seemed to him so lovely. What an exquisite spot this was; and why had he avoided coming down here for so many years? The last time he came, he reflected, was in the year he left Sandhurst. Henceforward the place would always be doubly dear to him. The refrain, "She loves me; she loves me; she loves me," echoed like rapturous music in his brain. Margot, the goddess with the china-blue eyes, who had made him suffer so by her cruelty, loved him at last, had accepted him! That afternoon he had seen the look in her adored eyes which he had seen in the eyes of so many hundreds of women for whom he had cared nothing. It was unmistakable! She loved him as much as he loved her. Their marriage would be one long idyll of happiness. She would be the most beautiful woman in London. Al-

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ways he would be envied for having secured her; it would be conclusive proof of his ascendancy over women. The fact that he knew nothing about her birth and parentage —a fact which had sometimes troubled him during the first stages of their intimacy—now worried him no more. Was she not related to Mary Henderson, who was one of the Blundells of Kingsworth. Mary Henderson had, *par excellence,* that magic cachet which the Falkenheims had lacked: the inherited gift for making anyone met under her roof automatically "all right."

The procession of the peacocks, followed by their hens, passed close beneath him, giving a curious Renaissance flavour to the scene. Ronald Heathcote observed them with the attention of an ornithologist studying "habits"; but Mrs. Heathcote looked quizzically from the peacocks to Vernon, and from Vernon back again to the peacocks. Her eyes were full of raillery as she asked him why he was "looking so pleased with himself." Vernon reddened becomingly, and laughed.

"If you really want to know the reason, Aunt Georgy," he said, with one hand on his moustache, "I'll tell you. I've just been accepted by the girl I propose to marry. Her name is Margot Cartier. She is a Canadian girl, and a cousin of the Hendersons of Kingsworth. She is staying there with them now. . . ."

"My dear Vernon, I congratulate you—both! I think I met the girl at a garden-party last week. Fair hair and blue eyes, and, forgive me, just a suspicion of a colonial manner?"

"Yes, that sounds like Margot. Didn't you think her lovely?" said Vernon. "I know you will like her, and I think my mother and father will, too. I haven't told them yet, but my father, for some reason of his own, has wired to me to-day to go to Highmere for a night.

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I can't imagine what he wants me for. However, it will give me an opportunity of announcing the news."

"Yes, it will give you that, I expect," Mrs. Heathcote commented, casting a sidelong glance at her handsome kinsman. She was fond of Vernon, and strove to appear enthusiastic, but she found it difficult. It occurred to her forcibly that Sir William Stokes would find it difficult too. Try how she would, she could not stifle her disappointment.

"My dear boy, I hope you will both be very happy indeed," she said, as they turned their backs on the peacocks. But all the while she felt a resentment against Margot—a wretched colonial interloper—for cutting in and spoiling the market. She had no children of her own, but she had a strong class feeling, combined with maternal instincts. She had hoped better of Vernon; and when she had received his letter inviting himself to West Frome for the end of August and the beginning of September, it had occurred to her with delight that one at least of the three "really nice" girls who would be staying in the house at that time would suit him to perfection. She had allowed her imagination to dwell on the pleasant prospect of a marriage between Vernon and Ida Mertoun. Now all her hopes were dashed and her plans frustrated by some scheming little Canadian, with no breeding; a creature only one degree better than the chorus.

The three "really nice" girls appeared round the corner of the house carrying rackets and forming a sort of guard of honour to a curate, of the muscular Christian type, who had been playing tennis with them. As Mrs. Heathcote watched them and paused, leaning on her ebony stick, to allow them to approach, she could not stifle the inevitable comparisons between her own day and

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the present, which old people find so tormenting, and from which simultaneously they derive so much satisfaction. Here were three girls of unimpeachable birth and breeding and of adequate fortune, and yet how impossible it seemed that they should find satisfactory husbands. Chorus girls, musical comedy queens, vulgar little adventuresses—all outclassed them. A woman, nowadays, needed but to be thoroughly common and to have a certain type of robust good looks to snap up the kind of man who in an earlier generation would barely have consented to make her his mistress. It was all a tangle. As Mrs. Heathcote grew older it pained her to see the increasingly daring lengths to which "really nice" girls were forced to go, in the stress of competition. Whenever she came across a girl dressed up in imitation of some lesser light of musical comedy or bedizened like a "fairy" in the effort to be the kind of thing that "our sort of men" appreciate, her heart would bleed with sympathetic understanding. . . .

Her three guests who surrounded the captive curate belonged to three distinct types of "nice" girl. The oldest of the three, Lady Agatha Blackford, was a washed-out blonde with rather pretty feet, who openly proclaimed (and bewailed) the fact that she would end up in a rectory if she could only find a parson sufficiently restful. She was an accomplished bazaar stall-holder, attender of "meetings," and organiser of charity concerts. She felt that since that was really all she could do, she had better go on doing it. At the present moment she was exercising a subtle proprietary interest in the Reverend Cuthbert Aitkinson, M.A. Mr. Aitkinson was not only an enthusiastic tennis player, but had also got his blue for rowing in the Cambridge boat in his last year at the University. He possessed an open, well-shaven coun-

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tenance, and his address at forty-five would certainly be The Close! The other two girls did not seriously compete with Lady Agatha. One of them, Ishbel Blount, a dark creature with something bold and passionate in her temperament, had early succumbed to the *mal du siècle,* and had almost forced herself upon the first man for whom she had cared, determined to give him all that he could find or buy elsewhere. She now had the unmistakable "married" look characteristic of a certain type of modern girl. As the years went by and her lover's reasons for not marrying her grew increasingly complicated and imaginative, her haggard and worried appearance grew more and more noticeable under her paint. The third girl, Ida Mertoun, on whose chances with Vernon Mrs. Heathcote had hitherto been counting, had not yet definitely settled on her plan of attack, though with Vernon she favoured the "literary and artistic" note. She was indeed in a fair way to becoming a charming little *précieuse ridicule;* but she had youth and freshness in her favour, as well as a certain ardour of temperament which suggested romantic possibilities, and translated itself in the ballroom into an emphatic style of dancing when her mother's eye was not upon her. There was nothing in Vernon's temperament, however, to dart out in answer to Ida's. He hated, particularly, to see thoroughly nice girls like Ida disporting themselves in a marked manner with inferior men. That sort of thing was thoroughly bad style. Had she been able to dance exclusively with himself he might have condoned her *abandon.* He had very strict views about ballrooms, and hated the men he met in them, except those who belonged to his own set, in his own profession, or who happened to stay in the particular houses which he himself was in the habit of visiting. Of the others—of the

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complicated, diverse, and thrilling mass, with its infinite possibilities and surprises, its varied interests and unexpected abilities—he was suspicious and disdainful. Even among soldiers he was difficult to please, and the poor, hard-working enthusiast in a line regiment, with rather gauche manners, no money, and a love for his profession, came in especially for his scorn. He often told a story how on one occasion, when on a voyage out to India, he had made a point of speaking to all the passengers except his "brother officers." He put a world of meaning into this anecdote; and the kind of people to whom he recounted it would solemnly nod their heads in sympathy.

Ida came straight up to Vernon, swinging her tennis racket, skilfully detached him from the rest of the group, and headed him off once more towards the terrace.

While they stood looking at the lovely view over the Frome she began to talk to him in low tones about the "poetry of eventide." She reminded him of their conversation at the Fawsett Vivians' dance about Meredith, and asked him if he had read "Diana of the Crossways." Vernon felt so happy, so complacent, that he was quite willing to talk Meredith, and looking down at Ida through his eyelashes, in a way which fluttered that maiden's heart, he told her that Mrs. Warwick was one of his favourite Meredithian characters. Mrs. Heathcote, who had been trying to persuade the curate to stop to dinner by telling him he need not bother to change, came up to them and overheard a part of the conversation. A little spasm of annoyance came over her: "My dear Vernon," she said, "'The Egoist' is the novel *you* ought to read, you know. You have a leg!" She was never more delightful in manner than when her humour had a sub-acid flavour! She smiled at Vernon, and then, tak-

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ing his arm affectionately, began to walk back with him to the house.

The cheerful voices of the party rose up into the still evening air, and in gently modulated tones the curate (who had yielded to persuasion) remarked:

"I never thought we should win that last game from them Lady Agatha. It was your service that did it, you know . . . !"

Vernon went off into the library after dinner and wrote Margot a long love-letter. He was so happy that he would have let his Aunt Georgy chaff him by the hour together if she had wanted to! The only cloud which marred his utter contentment was the thought of having to waste a whole twenty-four hours at Highmere with his parents. He would not be able to see his adored one until the day after to-morrow! The more he thought of his approaching visit to Highmere the more the necessity for it irritated him. Every day now that he spent away from the sight and sound of his beloved would be a day of torture. From this moment he wanted to be always with her, never to be separated from her even for an hour.

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CHAPTER XVIII

"My dear boy, it is quite a long time since we saw you!" said Lady Stokes when she had kissed her son, who had just arrived from West Frome in his two-seater. "Don't you think you could stay with us over the week-end? Surely Aunt Georgy would spare you. . . .?" Vernon sank down into the empty chair by his mother's side, and took one of her thin hands in his. He thought she looked older and more fragile than when he had seen her last, and that she seemed unhappy. "By and by I will come and stay with you for a long visit," he said, "and I will bring someone with me to see you. I have great news for you, mother. Guess what it is!" The corners of Lady Stokes's mouth became drawn with anxiety when she noticed Vernon's expression of radiant satisfaction. She could not bring herself to guess.

"Margot Cartier has promised to marry me," he went on hurriedly. "We are going to be married very quietly, almost at once. I am arranging to send in my papers. . . ."

"Vernon!" Lady Stokes started in her chair and looked at her son in frank horror. "My dear boy . . . I had no idea. . . . Have you really gone so far as that? Could you not have thought it over for a little while longer, and consulted your father and me about it? He will be terribly disappointed. You don't understand, Vernon, how all your father's hopes and ambitions are bound up in you. . . ."

"But, mother, you liked Margot, didn't you? I am

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sure you will come to appreciate her when you know her better. . . . To tell you the truth, I am just about the luckiest man living!"

"Liking a girl and thinking her the right wife for one's son are not quite the same thing, my dear. I shall like her for your sake, if she makes you a good wife. But you must remember that women see other women without the glamour of sex to blind their eyes. And that makes such a difference. . . ."

"Well," said Vernon, rather disappointed at his mother's attitude, "I can tell you, I had a hard enough job to get her to take me on!"

Lady Stokes smiled brilliantly at her son as he made this naïve admission. They were sitting in the loggia—the one redeeming feature of a pretentious mid-Victorian house—looking down over the broad, wooded park-lands surrounding the hill on which Highmere was built. Soon Sir William would return from his morning ride of inspection, and they would be interrupted. Lady Stokes dreaded this as much as Vernon, for she loved her son more dearly than her husband.

"That must have been a change for you, Vernon," she said, with a little hint of malice.

"By Jove, yes! Whatever she is, she isn't mercenary." Vernon did not see his mother smile again, more sadly this time, and plunged into a boyish description of Margot's virtues and desirable qualities.

"All I want is for you to be happy, Vernon," Lady Stokes said at last, "and to make your wife happy. I'm growing an old woman, dear, and the older I grow the more presumptuous it seems to me to interfere in other people's destinies. You are a man now, and you have had more experience of the world than most men of your age. It would be absurd and wrong to try to

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influence you. All the same, I must say that my own experience has been that the happiest marriages are those which result in the union of two families of equal standing, who have known one another for a long time. . . . But I have come across many exceptions. One can't generalise. Whatever you do, you know I shall back you up. But promise me this one thing——" Lady Stokes looked with the eagerness of affection at her son, who was surprised to see his usually impassive mother display so much emotion. "Promise me this," she said, "that whatever your father says to you to-day you will hear him out and keep your temper. Humour him as much as possible, Vernon. He is getting on in years now, and is not nearly so strong as he looks. His heart has begun to be affected. And you are one of the few remaining interests in his life. . . ."

"But what is it he has to say to me?" Vernon asked, with renewed curiosity, and with a certain apprehension that made him feel queer inside. Mother and son caught sight simultaneously of an erect figure on horseback cantering up the drive towards the house, and the question was left unanswered. . . .

Sir William on horseback, at a garden-party, at dinner, at the opera, in the Park (and even in his bath), was a fine figure of a man. His thin, erect body, exquisitely-manipulated grey moustache, and almost too spotless and appropriate clothes, combined to make a picture of perfect form—a picture hard in outline perhaps, a little too brightly coloured and highly varnished, but still effective: the "portrait of a gentleman," as exhibited every summer at Burlington House. His salute to his wife and son before he got off his glossy chestnut—surrendering the animal with a "careless gesture" to the groom—was gravely dignified. He advanced slowly towards

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them, shook hands with Vernon, and settled himself in an armchair, talking of matters connected with the estate, the morrow's shooting parties, his own and neighbouring coverts.

Vernon had never cared for Highmere. His grandfather's taste in architecture, although the best that money could buy in 1860, caused him acute discomfort, and he had long decided that he would sell the place when he inherited it and buy another. There was a lovely Queen Anne house in Somerset, in a hollow of the Quantocks, which had belonged for many generations to the Cornewalls but had been sold by General Cornewall within the past ten years. Vernon had long had the idea of buying back Hotham Place as soon as it came into the market. He would speak to his father about it. If only the owners would sell now, how delightful it would be to set up house there with Margot! He had always loved the Quantocks. The old port of Bridgewater, with its houses of warm red brick and its memories of the Duke of Monmouth, would be the nearest town. . . .

He listened with only a semblance of attention to his father's talk about Highmere—talk which was meant entirely for his benefit. Already he saw the place in the hands of the estate agents, and wondered what it would fetch; whether, in view of the hideousness of the house, anyone could be got to bid for it at all. His imagination was luxuriating on Hotham during all the time that Sir William was enlarging on his difficulties with the tenants of Merlings, a large farm at the western extremity of his estate. Merlings had always been a trouble: it was unlucky. Even the most skilful farmers never really made it pay, and yet. . . .

Vernon heard his father's monotonous voice going on

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and on about it, describing the nature of the soil, the natural advantages of the position; the fact, in short, that it *ought* to be made to pay. Sir William added, in conclusion, that he had half a mind to take it over and farm it himself.

During the afternoon Vernon accompanied his father round the estate. There were coverts to be inspected, gamekeepers to be interviewed, the progress of new farm buildings and improvements to be examined and commented on. Vernon was aware of a certain nervous tension in their relations. Both were acutely conscious of the fact that an important, and perhaps painful, discussion lay ahead of them. The thought of it seemed already to raise up an impalpable barrier of hostility. Vernon thought he gained a hint of what was going on in his father's mind by his occasional references to his "settling down" and such phrases as "when you come into the estate." Evidently his father was thinking of his own death, his son's marriage, of the serious things of life. Vernon had a great distaste for "heart to heart" conversations; they embarrassed him, and his professional prejudices made it seem bad form to talk about death except flippantly. And all the time he kept nervously wondering how his father would take his announcement of his intended marriage and of his decision to send in his papers. The property which he had inherited from an uncle only brought him in £2,500 a year. The rest of his income was allowed him by Sir. William. . . . Unpleasant possibilities presented themselves, but the thought that he must do his best, for Margot's sake, to keep his end up nerved him for the coming ordeal. He knew his father was anxious for him to make an imposing marriage; and as he contemplated Sir William's straight shoulders, perfectly-cut coat, and implacable grey moustache, he

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wondered how he would take his disappointment. *Suaviter in modo,* of course; the old man would always be that. . . .

The afternoon wore at last to an end. Some neighbours came to call at tea-time of whom Vernon strongly disapproved. He showed his sense of superiority by being subtly rude to them, greatly to his mother's irritation. He had always been just like that, ever since he left Sandhurst, she reflected, sadly. Would his thick armour of vanity never crack? Or would this Canadian girl who had succeeded in making a fool of him, succeed further by boring holes in it? The thought that she might do so almost reconciled Lady Stokes to the marriage.

Vernon did not enjoy his dinner that night. He and his mother talked about Aunt Georgy's house and household, and the thought of Aunt Georgy inevitably called up a vision of Margot. He was conscious of keeping her name purposely out of the conversation, conscious that his mother would notice this and draw deductions. Yet why on earth should he be ashamed of Margot? Ought he not to have made the announcement to his father at once, this morning? Would not his father conclude from the postponement that he had a feeling of guilt about what he had done? Was not his silence almost an admission on his part that his marriage was open to criticism? . . .

It was a great relief when his mother rose from the table and his father asked him to come into the library to smoke a cigar. The moment had come at last: how were things going to pan out?

"I expect you are wondering why I wired for you to come here . . . " Sir William began.

"Well, I hoped it wasn't anything to do with your health, sir," replied Vernon.

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"Oh, no; I'm good, I hope, for some years yet, though my heart has lately been giving me some trouble. It was really about yourself, my dear boy; and what I have to tell you is a difficult thing to have to say. . . . You know, Vernon, a man's idea of a woman, while he is making love to her, and his idea of the same woman after he has lived with her for three months, is always a very different thing. He may like her just as well; but he sees her more clearly, and his eyes begin to notice subtleties—subtleties of behaviour, manners, point of view. It may be a trite saying, but marriage is a very serious undertaking. If a man ever needs to look before he leaps, he does so when he contemplates getting married. Some marriages are made in Heaven, of course; but, believe me, about all the others one ought, as it were, to consult one's solicitor. There is no permanence in passion for the average man, Vernon; and affection which lasts, and which alone makes marriage a success, nearly always springs from similarity of point of view, upbringing, and so on. . . ."

Sir William looked at the end of his cigar, as though seeking inspiration. Vernon's colour had risen, but he said nothing. He was not going to help his father out. "I hope you won't do anything rash, Vernon. You must understand without my telling you, that the position you will inherit on my death is one which many young women would be only too glad to share with you. That will make it all the more difficult for you to find disinterested affection, unless you look for it among girls whose fortune or position is at least equal to your own. And then there is this point: the position of your wife is not one which every girl you meet will be capable of filling with credit to herself and to you. When you are thinking seriously of marrying, don't forget your own mother, whom your wife will have to succeed."

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"Well, I *am* thinking seriously of marrying," Vernon blurted out. "To tell you the truth, father, I was very glad to get your telegram and to have this chance of a talk. I've just got engaged to Margot Cartier. I am sending in my papers. We hope to be married almost at once. I feel sure you'll like her tremendously, father, when you get to know her. . . ."

"Good God! You don't mean to tell me . . ." Sir William broke in. His jaw set rigidly, and only the hard light in his grey eyes betrayed the intensity of his anger and disappointment. "So you are engaged," he rapped out, eventually.

"Yes."

"*My* father would have withheld his permission to such folly and made his son suffer for his stupidity. But I can't do that; I can only warn you, Vernon, of what you are doing. I was certain that you were making a fool of yourself! Well, I have found out all about this girl with whom you are entangled; I don't suppose for a moment that you know anything about her yourself, except what she chooses to fill you up with. It may interest you to hear that she is some Montreal tradesman's brat—a penniless adventuress who was picked up on board ship. . . ."

Vernon jumped up from his chair and threw away his cigar. His face was a deep red with rage and disgust. He was ashamed of his father.

"Margot and I are definitely engaged to be married. As far as I am concerned, my decision is irrevocable. To talk scandal about your future daughter-in-law doesn't therefore appear to me to be in the best of taste. . . ."

The veins in Sir William's forehead swelled and his lips under his moustache compressed themselves into thin, bluish lines.

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"Sit down, Vernon," he said at last, "and listen to me. You are too old for this kind of nonsense. It is my plain duty not to let you commit this act of folly with your eyes shut. After all, your marriage is a matter which vitally concerns your whole family. You have no right to introduce into your family a creature of whom you could not possibly expect your mother to approve. Not only is this girl sprung from the gutter, but her reputation is already besmirched. . . ."

"If that is all . . ." said Vernon, with icy calm.

"It is *not* all. Her name has been mentioned to me in connection with Sir Carl Frensen; you know what that means."

"If you will tell me who it is who has mentioned it in that connection," Vernon broke in, "I shall have much pleasure in thrashing him within the next twenty-four hours. Good God! Carl Frensen! Why, he is sixty if he's a day!"

Sir William shrugged his shoulders. "It was my duty to tell you. Your remark about Frensen's age does more credit to your innocence than to your intelligence. That is all I can say. You will be an incredible fool if, after what I have told you, you don't get out of the entanglement as quickly as you can. I'll find the money for you. Of course, she will have to be bought off. . . ."

When Sir William looked at his son he was shocked to find Vernon's face blazing with anger. Tears of rage poured from his eyes.

"What utter filth!" he gasped. "You listen to the lying garbage disseminated by a lascivious old Jew, who tried to seduce his guest under the cloak of hospitality, and then repeat it to me as if it were the truth! Thanks. I prefer to remain an 'incredible fool.' Carl Frensen, indeed! It makes one sick. . . ."

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"You are doomed to find a great many things in life, Vernon, which will make you very sick indeed," retorted his father, whose temper, like his son's, was beginning to get out of hand. The effort he made to control himself was painful to watch; his cloak of diplomacy was swiftly beginning to slip away from him. As his parent began to lose his self-control, Vernon found himself growing calm again, and he recovered his nerve as suddenly as he had lost it.

He began to finger his moustache, and paced slowly up and down the hearth-rug.

"I really think I had a right to expect that you would keep this filth to yourself—at least after I told you of our engagement."

Sir William's face twitched convulsively.

"Vernon, you must be mad or intoxicated. How dare you insult me like this? . . . What I have told you was for your own good. It was my duty to tell you. Beware how you carry things too far with me. Beware, I tell you. . . ."

The old man pulled himself out of his armchair and stood up in front of his son, glaring at him. Once again all the nerves in his face twitched horribly. Vernon returned his father's glance with interest, and raised supercilious eyebrows.

"I can't see any object in continuing this discussion," he said in a contemptuous voice.

"Oh, you can't?" Sir William snapped. "Very well. Let me tell you this. It you marry this gutter girl, Frensen's cast-off mistress, you shall never have Highmere or anything else of mine if I can prevent it. . . . So you know now. Perhaps in future you will reserve your supercilious airs for those who will tolerate them. . . ."

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Vernon looked at his father, whose face was transformed by fury, and gasped. Then, fearful lest he should do something foolish and irrevocable, he turned quickly on his heel and left the room. He fancied he heard a curious, heavy thud as he stood in the hall, but he paid no attention to it, and hurrying upstairs knocked at the door of his mother's room.

"Vernon, dear, what has happened?" Lady Stokes asked, when she saw her son's haggard face. Her eyes were nervous and reproachful. "I hope you remembered what I told you this morning. He is an old man, Vernon. His heart . . ."

"He said the most fearful things about Margot. Horrible lies . . . and he went on with them long after I told him we were engaged . . . I couldn't stand it."

"What did you do?"

"Came away. As I left he told me he would cut me off with the proverbial shilling if I married Margot. . . . Quite in the approved style!"

"Vernon, why couldn't you have humoured him, as I asked you?"

"If you had heard what he said!"

"I must go down to him, Vernon." Lady Stokes put aside her work-box and went to the door. "I am very uneasy." Her nervousness communicated itself to her son, and he reproached himself for not having endured the interview in silence. After all, his father was privileged. But he could not go down with his mother and apologise now. It would look as though he were trying to repair the breach from mercenary motives. And his pride could not tolerate that imputation. His mother was hurrying downstairs to the library, and he stopped for a few minutes looking over into the hall from the

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first-floor landing. In those moments an uncanny sensation of dread came over him. . . . Then suddenly the bell of the library rang violently, again and again. He could hear its incessant clamour far away in the servants' quarters. Something serious must have happened. He ran hastily downstairs. By the time he had reached the hall, the butler had also appeared, and was already opening the door of the library. Over the old servants' shoulder Vernon saw his father stretched out on the floor, his mother bending over him.

"Telephone to Dr. Burkitt, Andrews," Lady Stokes said in a perfectly calm voice. "Sir William has had a seizure. . . ." Vernon had never admired his mother more than he did at that moment, but a glance she gave him from her clear grey eyes seemed to freeze his blood. Other servants began now to arrive. The maids peered into the doorway timidly. Then the housekeeper came, brushed them aside, and went into the room, kneeling down by the sick man and whispering officiously to Lady Stokes. In the horror of the moment, Vernon detested himself for noticing such trifles as the housekeeper's airs of self-importance and her paralysing efficiency. He wondered how the maids put up with it. With the help of Miss Austerley, Sir William groaning weakly, was lifted on to a sofa and an effort was made to give him some brandy. Half an hour at least must elapse before the doctor could motor over from Guildford. During the long time of waiting, Vernon noticed that his mother ignored him. She kept her eyes continuously on her husband. To Vernon's disgust, he found that every now and then his thoughts would wander. He sat down in the revolving chair by his father's writing-table, resting his dejected head in his hands. For some moments he sat in the silent room with his eyes closed. When he

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opened them he found himself, half-unconsciously, reading a letter which lay open on the blotting-pad in front of him. He had not noticed it before. "Dear Sir William Stokes," it began, "I trust you will pardon this communication from a comparative stranger, but in view of your son's intimacy with a Miss Carter (to whom he was unfortunately introduced by my wife) I feel it is no less than my duty to bring certain facts to your notice. . . ." So this was what had caused all the trouble, this tissue of malicious inventions, wrapped up in pompous, hypocritical language! Vernon read the letter through, and then glanced guiltily round the room. But his mother and Miss Austerley were still bending over the sofa where his father lay moaning, and seemed almost unaware of his presence. He put the letter back into its envelope and gripped it between his two hands in order to tear it into a hundred pieces.

It was an hour before the doctor arrived—the longest hour that Vernon could remember in the whole of his life. The stricken may lay groaning on the sofa, with grey face and eyes that rolled from side to side, unseeing. Vernon was relieved when the doctor dismissed him from the room; the strain was getting on his nerves, and it was obvious that there was nothing he could do. He went upstairs to his bedroom and sat down in his armchair. He did not dare to go to bed. Something in the doctor's voice had warned him that the end might come suddenly. He opened a novel, trying to concentrate himself on the story, but he found it impossible to do so. When Miss Austerley knocked at his door shortly after two o'clock in the morning, to tell him that his father had died without recovering consciousness, she found that he had fallen asleep with the book on his knees.

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MARGOT'S PROGRESS

Part III

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CHAPTER XIX

"How do you do, my dear?" said the Duchess (herself the daughter of a seventh duke), as she advanced with a smile across Margot's drawing-room. They had dined with one another, Margot and Vernon had spent two week-ends at Stretton, and they had been to the Opera in her box to hear Melba and Caruso in "Bohême" —a "big" night. As Margot poured out tea for her guest she felt their conversation—after that intimate greeting and all that it implied to the other people in the room, as well as "below-stairs"—would be in the nature of an anti-climax. She wished now that the duchess would get up again, say "Good-bye, my dear! till Tuesday," very prettily, and walk out. The bazaar that was to be held on Tuesday at the Duchess's Berkeley Square house hung over Margot like a nightmare; at the thought of it waves of *ennui* broke over her like asphyxiating gases. And for at least half an hour she must appear interested, enthusiastic! She felt inclined to drop her egg-shell china teacup and say, "Blast your bazaar!" The thought of sharing a stall with a much-advertised marchioness no longer excited her. She had become intimate with several marchionesses last summer; marchionesses had lost their freshness! There wasn't one of her new friends whom she would really have exchanged for Rachel, and as the heady excitement of going to their great houses wore off, they began increasingly to bore her. For the hugeness of her own house she was beginning to have the contempt bred of familiarity. How she hated her vast bedroom with its enormous, pompous bed! She had

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tried doing away with it and substituting a smaller bed, but the dainty piece of modern French furniture had looked ridiculous in the great room. It hadn't seemed worth while offending Vernon over so small a matter. The bed in which he had first seen the light was sacred in his eyes, so it had been restored, with its tacit reproach against her for not having achieved what the family expected.

Vernon had gone down to Hotham for two nights to interview an architect about a garage which he was having built. He hardly ever went away without her, and the sensation of having her house to herself was as delightful as it was rare. She hated having to waste a single moment over her callers, and longed for six o'clock to come, when she would be free from them. The only people in the room for whom she cared in the least were Jack and Vivie Nugent, and she could see that they were preparing to fly. Vivie, she knew, "could stand anything but charity." The Nugents lived in a tiny house in John Street—all new paint and art curtains and with the dinkiest door-knocker—and everyone wondered how they managed. They were a fluffy couple of chatterers who went everywhere, and made a regular business of dining out. Vivie's infectious laugh could be heard livening the most pompous dinner-parties, and all her enemies praised her for being "an extremely clever woman." In any case, bridge and the skilful letting of furnished flats for the season were certainly their only *visible* means of subsistence. Margot liked Vivie Nugent—she was the only woman in Vernon's set whom she could tolerate—but she was rather nervous of her sharp eyes and ready wit. You could never be quite sure what Vivie might not do if she were really in a hobble! Vivie, however, could be relied on to be amusing, and what she did not

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know about the particular world to which Margot was a newcomer was hardly worth knowing. She had reduced social intercourse to a science, and Margot had many times been thankful for her advice.

While the Duchess went on about the bazaar and Vivie grew restive, Margot was thinking about Rachel Elkington. Rachel, whom she had not seen since a month or two before Mrs. Elkington's death, which had taken place soon after the new year, was coming to dine with her that night, and they would be able to have a long evening together, talking over old times. How jolly that would be! Rachel had been travelling about ever since her mother's death, which had been a great shock to her, and had only recently returned to Hyde Park Street.

"Well, I do hope it will be a *tremendous* success," she heard herself saying. What was it that was to be the success? The bazaar, of course! That miserable bazaar.

"My own view is that unless the committee adopts an entirely different tone towards the stall-holders, the only way to bring it to its senses will be for us to resign in a body," the Duchess went on. "I shall withdraw my consent to everything. Do you know what they actually had the cheek to say to Millicent Bradstock yesterday? . . . Wasn't it too bad?"

All the ladies (except Vivie, who seized this moment to make her adieux, and was *quite* charming to the Duchess when she did so) seemed to chirp up at the mention of the committee's shortcomings. It reminded Margot, as she sat watching them behind her beautiful tea-table, laden with rare china and Queen Anne silver, of the back kitchen at Price Street when one of her father's cronies had begun to tell a bawdy story. The men, from a lethargic puffing of their clays, had all shifted in their chairs, opened their eyes, and shown signs

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of life, when one of them, amid coughings and circumlocutions, began on the all-absorbing topic. In her heart of hearts Margot felt it was more sensible to be galvanised into interest by bawdiness than by "committees," but she concluded that if duchesses were to be known certain sacrifices were only to be expected. Mrs. Harwich, who knew all the Royal family *personally*, had begun to heave when the committee had been mentioned. Her distress was as patent as that of a volcano before it achieves its eruption. She had an anecdote, direct from the most august circles. The *obiter dicta* of a princess swelled and struggled in her bosom. "Princess Augusta of Hochberg-Leitstein," she achieved eventually, "told me only yesterday that the way the committee went on was a perfect scandal. If it were not for the sake of the *cause*, she assured me she would have withdrawn her patronage ages ago."

"Not that the old cat's patronage is worth such a lot, when all's said," Lady Cynthia Deene interposed briskly. "All the same, it only shows. . . ." She went on resolutely explaining what it showed, and Margot fell to wondering how such ruthless energy had come to devote itself to the cause of fashionable bazaars. Mrs. Harwich was different; she was the widow of a court clergyman, and made a business of that sort of thing. . . .

Mrs. Harwich got up to go as one who regrets that she cannot remain to hear charitable princesses called "old cats," and the amusement of watching her take leave of Lady Cynthia almost reconciled Margot to her spoiled afternoon. To make matters worse, she remembered that she might have been at Ranelagh all this time. Carl Frensen had wanted her to go with him, and she had forgotten all about it. The bazaar, however, was

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very important. She was to be presented to the "old cat," and a vista of semi-royal entertainments floated before her mind. Somehow, the almost certain presence of Mrs. Harwich at every one of them seemed to spoil the view. What, after all, was the good of it? She would probably only be bored, and she was tired of meeting new people. She longed for the sultry excitements of the lower social altitudes. The higher she climbed the more rarefied grew the air. In an atmosphere redolent of "social service," where everyone, men and women, were painfully conscious of their duties to the State and to the "lower orders," she breathed with difficulty, and it occurred to her sometimes that it might almost be more fun really to belong to the "lower orders" and just be "worked amongst." It would save so much trouble. But better still it would be to be like Rachel. The more she thought of Rachel the more she envied her. Rachel never got tired of the things she was interested in; and in spite of the fact that she wasn't married, how much she seemed to get out of life! She never did anything that didn't amuse her. It was impossible to imagine her spending a dull afternoon at a charity bazaar. . . . Margot wondered if she could get out of it all at the eleventh hour by taking a strong line about the committee. But no, there was no chance of it. All committees were always abused just in the same way; it never made any difference whatever to the holding of the bazaars. "The poor debs simply have to do something else, besides squashing themselves against young men's shirt-fronts, in paroxysms of negroid dancing!" Lady Cynthia observed.

The silent but irreproachable soldier who always seemed to be there—either this one or another just like him—emitted certain sounds of carefully modulated laughter.

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"By Jove, that just about describes them!" he remarked, joining in the conversation for the first time for some minutes. Margot knew quite well that he would wait until the Duchess and Lady Cynthia had rattled off. Then he would get up and stand over her and say good-bye—standing sufficiently near to enable her to smell the scent on his curled, blonde moustache. He had hard blue eyes, his morning coat was cut in well at the waist (he went to the same tailor as Vernon) and his check trousers were perfectly creased. Considerable attention had been given to the cut of his patent-leather boots. . . . But what did he think about? Why did he smile and purr over her hand and call her "dear lady"? Perhaps all the other women knew what the game was and played it. To her these men were simply elegant automata; they never seemed really to exist at all. She supposed something went on behind their impeccable masks; but what was it? What impelled this Captain Hellyar to come and waste half an hour in her drawing-room? Was it merely in order to let her perceive his admiration? But what did the admiration amount to? Where was it supposed to lead? Was it just a habit? Supposing she encouraged him—or one of the others, what then? Was that the object of the perfumed moustache? If she were to feel it on her cheek, what would be the next stage? Would he reveal the fact that he had a personality of his own behind the varnish, a character capable of the originality of passion? What a boring little personality it would probably be, she reflected. But heaps of women must like that sort of thing, since it is always demand which creates supply. She wondered if she would ever come to understand the psychology of the people among whom she had lived since her marriage. She was almost as far from under-

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standing Vernon now as she had been on her wedding day. He also wore a mask. Whatever his personal interests may really have been, he only liked to be expansive about those connected with sport, food, drink, amusements. Even there he only liked the "higher drama," and cared nothing for music. Captain Hellyar would be just like that too. Everything would "bore him" except perhaps racing, going to Deauville in August, and talking in his club about "deuced handsome" women.

"So I don't really think there *is* anything we can do," the Duchess concluded. "We can only hope they will have the sense to give us an *entirely* free hand on the day, and not interfere with the arrangements. . . ."

Margot thought this rather a lame conclusion to a visit ostensibly intended for the concocting of measures.

"Catch them giving anyone a free hand!" snapped Lady Cynthia uncompromisingly. "They'll wreck the whole thing if they possibly can!"

"Well, good-bye, my dear," said the duchess in her chirpy voice, giving Margot her hand. "I have told Julia that you will turn up early on Tuesday." Julia was the marchioness with whom Margot was to share the stall for the sale of water-colour drawings by "society" artists. As the two women swept out of the room—the duchess like a frigate under full sail and Lady Cynthia lean and black as a torpedo-boat destroyer—Margot wondered whether she was to "turn up early" in order to enable Julia to turn up late. . . .

Captain Hellyar nipped this line of thought in the bud by making a remark. "By Jove, it's awfully good of you ladies to take so much trouble over charities, upon my word it is! As for the duchess, I don't know what

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the poor would do without her. She is simply indefatigable—year after year!"

"Well, I hope it does *some* good," Margot said. "It's boring enough!"

"By Jove, yes, I suppose it must be!" said Captain Hellyar, a light dawning on him. He spoke with conviction, as though he had suddenly come face to face with some great truth. He rose, remembering that he too had his duties. "I believe I'm supposed to be at Prince's. No peace, is there? But it is really rather amusing sometimes in the hour before dinner. Won't you let me take you one afternoon?" It was the obvious moment for the handsome soldier to let off his discreetly burning glance. Margot, so to speak, watched it coming—held herself ready for moustache perfume. She might have laughed in his face and turned him into an enemy for life if she had not suddenly remembered that he belonged to the club in whose tent she wanted to have luncheon on Gold Cup Day. He might come in useful. She smiled back at him, and he went off in the seventh heaven. She could almost see the phrase "Deuced handsome woman" rattling about in his brain, like a pea in a bladder. . . .

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CHAPTER XX

WHEN the last visitor had gone, Margot went to her room to lie down to rest before Rachel's arrival. It was an oppressive afternoon, although the summer was not far advanced. The unexpected heat was overpowering, but the leaden sky promised a thunderstorm that would be welcome. Margot was glad of a cold shower-bath before she began to dress. She chose a clinging frock of pale green, rather daringly cut. It was a frock which she thought showed her beauty to the greatest advantage, but there were few occasions on which she felt quite safe in wearing it. This, however, was one of them.

Margot awaited her friend in her own sitting-room, a small, oblong-shaped room on the second floor, carpeted in a vivid green drugget. The outer curtains and the felt surrounding the carpet were of royal blue. The lampshades were very elaborate and Eastern. The white paint of door and window frames, the azaleas in pots, all gave an air of brightness to the room, while the pictures on the walls, if they were of her own choosing, did credit to Margot's taste. One of them was a painting of herself standing in a shaft of sunlight by a dark cabinet. Her lips were slightly parted, and her china-blue eyes danced with pleasure. The pose vaguely suggested Alfred Stevens' picture, "Le Cabinet Rose," and Rachel's explanation of her look of delight was that Vernon had evidently just promised her a tiara. "Nothing else would make your eyes light up so," Rachel had said. Margot thought of this remark as she glanced at her portrait while waiting for Rachel to arrive. . . .

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Through the open window she could see the trees which make the "quaint" end of Charles Street so charming. They were almost lyrical in their fresh greenery for this wonderful month, and the foliage seemed to make a lovely music, like the song of birds. But in a few weeks' time the leaves would be heavy with dust. . . . At last she heard the crunch of a brake as a taxi drew up outside the house.

"My darling girl. What ages it is. And *how* lovely!" Rachel embraced her friend fervently, then disengaged herself to admire the frock—a curious glow of admiration seeming to run all over her as she did so. "You are lovelier than ever, Margot," she went on. "There's no doubt that marriage agrees with you. . . . You can't imagine how glad I am to be back in England. It's five months to-day since mother died, so that it must be over six months since I last saw you. Do you remember we went to the Russian Ballet together and saw 'Le Pavillon d'Armide'? We must go again. I see they are doing several new ballets this season. . . . Now you must tell me your news."

Margot knew quite well that her capture of the Duchess of Stretton, her approaching attack on Princess Augusta of Hochberg-Leitstein, would not interest her friend in the least, and when she came to examine her life during the past seven months she discovered that it had been filled exclusively with episodes of this kind, varied by occasional quarrels with Vernon. There had been nothing else in it at all. The quarrels with Vernon had been the only bright spots. They had relieved the monotonous unreality of things, and it had given her a certain satisfaction (of which she was rather ashamed) to realise how acutely she could hurt him.

"I simply haven't done anything of the slightest

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interest, Rachel," she said. "I have seen Mary Henderson once or twice, which always does me good, though it makes me discontented. We can get over from Hotham fairly quickly in the car, you know; it's only the next county. She contrives to be so tremendously happy. And she really does do *good*. She doesn't play at it as I do. . . . My dear, I'm keeping a stall at a bazaar on Tuesday! I've forgotten what it is in aid of. A mission to Jews, I dare say!" Margot's flash of humour convulsed Rachel.

"You must send a copy of the *Morning Post* describing the function to Israel Falkenheim," she said. "Do you ever see him now?"

"We exchange poisoned glances sometimes, and the other night at the Opera he had the cheek to stare at me through his glasses in the entr'acte. I was in Carl Frensen's box. You know he hates Carl Frensen like sin—so does Vernon, for that matter. I wonder why it is? Has he a purple past, do you think?"

"Rather purple, I believe," said Rachel, "but of course he ought to be extinct by now!"

"I don't believe people ever become extinct, nowadays, however old they get. Look at Lord Bridley, for instance! The legend that they do is simply encouraged to enable young girls to contract mercenary marriages. Do you know, I think a girl has to be *very* young to be forgiven for marrying her grandfather. . . ."

"Oh, I don't believe very young girls *are* very young nowadays," Rachel remarked cynically. "And it is simply amazing how coarse some of the most refined-looking women are, under the surface," she went on. "No wonder men say we are only half civilised! But how is one ever to know what other people are like until some striking action shows them up to us? We all of us

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cover ourselves up in paint and varnish. It's just as well we do! At least the result is decorative!"

The two friends went down to dinner, which had been set in the library as being cosier than the big dining-room. Margot enjoyed showing Rachel the alterations she had made in the room, and it was charming to have someone in whom she could confide. The two details about the dinner which pleased Rachel particularly were the bowl of red roses in the centre of the table, and the fact that the waiting was done by the maids instead of by the men-servants.

After dinner they went upstairs once more to Margot's "den."

"You know it is jolly to see you again, Rachel," Margot said as they settled themselves on the comfortable round sofa. "You always make me think of the days when we first met. I don't suppose you can realise how exciting those days were for me! It's just that excitement that I miss . . . Of course, Vernon is a great dear, and it's jolly being married and having a house and all that. But you will never be able to understand what that first summer was like, three years ago, when I was staying with the Falkenheims. . . ."

"They were awfully good to you."

"Yes, I haven't forgotten. I was only talking nonsense just now about the "poisoned glances"! I make a point of not cutting them when we meet, which we do occasionally. Mrs. Falkenheim bows to me quite placidly, just as if I had dined there the night before; but Israel always looks like the Recording Angel. He takes off his hat gravely; his face never moves a muscle. Funny, isn't it, when one remembers what happened? Did I ever tell you, Rachel? He used to lie in wait for

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me, you know—outside my room. That's what I meant about volcanoes never getting extinct. . . ."

Rachel had heard the story from Margot before, also rather different stories from other people. But she believed Margot's version implicitly. Could any man, however old, resist such radiant beauty?

"You know men are all the same. They are all so much more animal than we are. Women who are as bad as men in that respect are exceptions. I admit the exceptions are sometimes worse. . . ."

"I wonder if you are right, Rachel?" Margot asked. "I'm not at all sure if what you call 'animalism' isn't something that's perfectly normal to men and women alike; and no more revolting than any other sign of bodily health, like a good appetite for breakfast, for instance. The trouble with us women is that we nearly always sentimentalise over the sex business. If we meet a good-looking man who rouses our desires, we must needs try to make the whole affair into a *grande passion* and endow the poor creature with all sorts of qualities he doesn't possess. Men, luckily, do the same with us. All that we are really after, the whole time, is just sensual gratification. No, I don't believe there's anything to choose between men and women except that women *will* let their hearts get in the way. . . ."

"Dearest Margot," said Rachel, "you are unjust to women because I don't think you really quite understand them. The women you talk about are only those who have not yet broken free from the age-long sex bondage. They are still just what the men make of them. But there are numbers of other women who have got rid of that kind of thing, completely: set themselves free."

"Then they can't be healthy. . . ."

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"Indeed they are; and they are certainly not cold. They have a true respect for their own sex; and their whole attitude and outlook on life are more spiritual than a man's outlook."

"Why, Rachel, you've changed in the last three years almost as much as I have!"

"I suppose I have. I've come to understand things better, especially other women. You don't know, Margot, what a splendid thing it is to be a woman. The old idea that woman is dependent for everything on man is exploded, done for. Women have a genius of their own, which doesn't in the least need men's help for its development and growth." Rachel looked eagerly at her friend, her eyes shining. All her old subdued gentleness had left her now. She was eager and enthusiastic, but her lovely eyes had in them something hungry and anxious which disquieted Margot, whilst rousing her curiosity.

"Talking of genius," Rachel went on, "Genée is dancing again in London, in 'Robert le Diable.' Will you come and dine with me on Wednesday and go on afterwards to see her?"

"Why, of course, Rachel," she said, "I shall love to come. I've never been to a music-hall in my life. . . . It will be most exciting and such a relief! You can't think how bored one gets. . . . Do you know, my dear, I shall have to spend the whole of Tuesday selling 'works of art,' at the Duchess of Stretton's! Can you imagine anything more tedious? However, I've let myself in for it. There is no escape, apparently, though I'm just about reaching the end of my tether. One of these days I shall tell Vernon I can't stand any more."

But Rachel was not in the least interested in Margot's

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duchess. As soon as she could, she changed the subject to the new decorations of her drawing-room.

"I really think it *is* rather original," she said. "All the decorations are in red and black. The black carpet and black tulips are extraordinary effective."

"Black tulips!" exclaimed Margot.

"Yes, darling. Isn't it a cute idea? I first tried them yesterday evening. It is simply wonderful, you would never believe how well the black tulips look. My florist gets them specially for me. . . ."

"Well, I shall be thrilled to see the room, Rachel," Margot replied.

The conversation drifted back to the absorbing topic of the opposite sex.

"I can't understand why you have suddenly got such a down on men," said Margot. "Men are put into the world to be useful to us. What is it you object to in them? So long as we don't break our hearts and all that kind of thing, men are at our own mercy! By making use of them, a woman can do as she likes. Their admiration keeps us interested in life; and they are necessary to our happiness in so many ways!"

"That's where I can't agree, darling. I shall have to initiate you into the woman movement I can see. I'm not a suffragette, you know, and politics bore me, personally; but the whole movement is simply the most splendid thing that has happened in our time!" Rachel's eyes shone with enthusiasm as she warmed to her topic. "Of course, you, as a married woman, are inclined to think that no female can be happy or even sane, if she hasn't a husband or lovers. But it isn't so, it really isn't. I don't want you to get the impression that I've suddenly turned into a frantic man-hater. I don't really like men any less than I did; but where the change lies

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is in the fact that in the last year or two I have grown to appreciate women more. As a young girl, of course, like everyone else, I wasn't particularly pleased to be a female; and when I reached the 'clever' age I had a great distrust and dislike for my own sex. It is only recently, within the last few years, that I have come to realise how wrong I was. Women are splendid, Margot! We are at the dawn of a new era. The whole outlook for women is changing and widening. Now don't think I am talking suffrage. I don't mean politics at all. Politics are only the pompous frivolity of second-rate minds. I mean things that matter. . . ."

Margot smiled at her friend, as she sat flushed and eager, so unlike the placid Rachel she had first known.

"But if we play our cards right we are boss of the show already, dearest," Margot replied, "thanks to our continued influence and ascendancy over men. We pull the strings, like that creature in the play. The men dance. The result is that we are all-powerful. But as soon as we eliminate men and cease to enslave them, I can't see that we have a chance. We can't compete on equal terms with them. And we can't alter our bodies just because we change our ideas. Personally I don't want to have children; but I'm exceptional in that way; and so, perhaps, are you. But it is surely obvious that child-bearing is what we women are intended for. From our necks to our knees, we're made for nothing else. . . . To most of us, therefore, men are essential for our natural fulfilment and growth. . . ."

"My dear," said Rachel, "I quite agree that many women, perhaps the majority of us, are admirably fitted for motherhood. But I don't agree that that is what all women are for, any more than I agree that paternity must necessarily form part of a man's career. That is

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an absurd belief. The world is over-populated as it is. Let there be a minority of both sexes who specialise in parentage—just as some people specialise in medicine or the law. Surely there is no reason why the whole of mankind should thus be held in bondage to posterity? After all, if we were blindly to fall in with Nature's views, where on earth should we be? What are our minds and our souls for, except to arm us against Nature? If Nature had her way there would be no morality at all; and instead of wearing lovely clothes, our bodies would probably be covered with nasty, bristly fur to keep the cold out! I believe, Margot, you cling to the old theory that a woman who doesn't choose to marry the first male she meets, or to pander to some man's animalism without the ceremony, hasn't a right to exist. But *she has*. There's a higher life open to her if she can only grasp it—a full, wonderful, glorious life——"

"Well," said Margot indulgently, "you are rapidly making a convert. I really haven't ever thought about these things in relation to other poeple. I dare say you are perfectly right, Rachel. As far as I am concerned, men like me, and I've gained everything I have from their liking. But I can well believe things might have fallen out differently. . . .!"

Rachel leaned forward on the sofa on which they were both sitting, and put her arm round Margot's bare shoulders and kissed her. "Men would indeed be fools, darling," she said, "if they didn't appreciate you. . . ."

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CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Rachel had gone and her maid was brushing her hair, Margot sat thoughtfully in front of her looking-glass. It seemed to her odd that she should be excited at the idea of going to a music-hall with Rachel. Before her marriage it would not have seemed so strange, but she felt that by this time she ought to have grown out of Rachel. Instead of that, she seemed only just beginning to appreciate her. Her married life had not turned out quite as she had anticipated it would. The mere fact of making a rich and splendid marriage had not brought with it all the joy and contentment she had looked for. On the whole, however, she liked Vernon better than she had expected, and she was grateful to him for his devotion to her at the time of his father's death. What anxious weeks they had been—when she stood to gain or lose everything—and how splendidly Adam had played up over the wedding! . . . Looking back over the past, she could not but congratulate herself on her astuteness, her determination. The slightest mistake would have meant shipwreck. But she had not made a mistake. Now that she was safely wedded and provided with a settlement (Adam had been a brick over the settlement and done the "heavy father" to perfection), she was beginning to feel a reaction. It was, as she had told Rachel, the excitement that she missed, the excitement of those hectic days she had spent with the Falkenheims in Richbourne Terrace, of the days which followed Sir William Stokes's death, of her honeymoon tour and Presentation. The last year had been a strain, because so little had happened in it: she had been so secure; and it

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had been a strain because she could no longer close her ears to the quiet voice of her own conscience. She was ashamed of herself for her treatment of Vernon, ashamed of her mercenary marriage, ashamed of having sold her body for wealth, for social position—things on which she no longer put the old valuation. The cry of her starved and hungry soul gave her no peace. She was unhappy, because she did not love. Love! How much there was in that hackneyed word which at last—perhaps too late—she was beginning to understand. The joy of love came from giving, from surrendering. How infinitely more blessed it was for a woman to give than to receive!

Vernon had settled down to the routine of life at Hotham and in Charles Street, and as the months went by he never revealed to her any new aspects of his character. She did not believe he ever would reveal any: there was something at once impenetrable and wooden about him, which maddened her. He had nothing of the elusiveness of a man like Godfrey Levett, for instance. She had not thought of Godfrey for a long time, but Rachel's visit reminded her of him. She wondered why she had seen nothing of him since her marriage. It was strange that they had not met anywhere. She began to speculate as to what he had been doing, what sort of life he had been leading. She felt certain that he would not have married; and she thought of his mocking, intelligent eyes. He didn't care for women, or at least, he did not allow himself to be fooled by them. She liked him for this. She determined to ask Rachel for his address. She would send him a card for her dance. She remembered how he had prophesied that she would become a great London hostess, and had impressed on her that he must have his quail at supper! Well, he should have his quail. It would be amusing to talk over old times

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with him, and he would tell her the latest gossip about the Falkenheims.

"Milady is thoughtful this evening," said Ernestine, as she finished doing Margot's hair. But Margot did not want to talk to her maid to-night. She wished to be left alone. She enjoyed the unusual solitude and wanted to make the most of it. After all, this was almost the first time since her marriage that she and Vernon had slept under different roofs. A great resentment against the institution of marriage grew up in her, as she turned off the switch of her reading-lamp and settled herself to sleep.

Vernon came back in time for luncheon on Wednesday, very full of the new garage and disappointed with her for not being more interested. "I don't believe you would care a straw, Margot, if Hotham were burnt to the ground," he remarked.

"My dear," she said, "that entirely depends on whether it is fully insured or not!"

Vernon's eye rested on her resentfully for a moment, but his resentfulness died away as he looked at her—so fresh and radiant, in her thin blouse. How passionate she was, under that mask of indifference; how she adored him! Whenever her apparent coldness, her seeming complete lack of affection distressed and worried him, he would think of her in her voluptuous moods and his self-complacency would be restored.

"I'm dining with Rachel, to-night," Margot remarked, when luncheon was over and Vernon had finished telling her about the architect. "We are to go to a music-hall to see Genée dance. . . ."

Margot had long been aware of Vernon's dislike of Rachel. It amused her to watch the expression of disgust which he concealed with difficulty.

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"I hope you will enjoy yourself. Personally, if you will forgive me saying so, I think Rachel Elkington is one of the most poisonous women in London, and always have." Margot noticed that his eyes grew hard and that he gnawed his moustache as he made this admission. "But if you like her, I suppose I must be wrong. I shall probably dine at the Bachelor's with Patcham. . . ."

He went out of the room, leaving her maliciously amused. She enjoyed rubbing in Rachel; it was a little torture that never failed in its effect. And yet, she reflected, was not "rubbing things in" rather a cheap form of entertainment? It grew tedious after a while. When, later on, the car came round and she started off to make some calls, it dawned on her once again that until her marriage she had never in her whole life really suffered from *ennui*, and that not for months had she looked forward to anything as much as she looked forward to her evening with Rachel.

When the time came for her to dress for dinner Ernestine found her mistress in a capricious mood. Of her array of dinner frocks she could not make a choice. One after another was laid out on the bed, turned over, tried on, and rejected. The atmosphere grew decidedly stormy, and Ernestine's usually imperturbable good temper began to be ruffled. Finally Margot chose a frock of black charmeuse, made with a certain severity of line, and adorned only with one red rose at the waist and a shimmer of spangles on the sleeves and bodice. It was a beautiful frock, by Premet, and its skillful simplicity showed to perfection Margot's radiant youth. Her skin, after her bath, when Ernestine had dusted it with her favourite powder, gleamed at her in the glass. Her face, lightly flushed towards the ears with rouge, had an almost uncanny freshness. Since her marriage she

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had filled out, blossomed; and her beauty had grown more striking.

"Milady is at her loveliest this evening," said Ernestine caressingly. "Never has milady looked better!"

By the time that she was ready to go down to the car, even Margot was more or less satisfied with her appearance. She did not know why she should be feeling so anxious this evening to look her best. Perhaps it was that Rachel's taste in clothes, as in everything else, was so faultless.

When Margot reached her friend's house, she was shown straight upstairs to her bedroom, where Rachel was busy with her maid, putting finishing touches.

Rachel had definitely settled down in the house in Hyde Park Street which her mother had left her. She had no "companion," but a constant succession of friends to stay with her.

"Nina Meadowes is coming next week," she said during dinner, "but I'm all alone to-day. I didn't get anyone in for dinner, darling, as I thought it would be so much more fun, just us two. You haven't seen the drawing-room yet, have you? But you remember my telling you it has been redecorated *à la Russe?* I must take you up afterward and show you. We have plenty of time, as Genée doesn't come on till half-past nine. My dear, she is too wonderful. . . ."

"Do you know, I've never been inside a music-hall yet in my life!" said Margot. "Isn't it odd? I'm quite excited at the prospect. Vernon never goes to music-halls, and even the Opera bores him. He pretends he likes the "higher drama" and all that, and plays full of epigrams. He believes in people who sit looking at each other for about half an hour and then cough up one re-

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mark, full of interior meanings. Personally, I prefer the people who gabble-gabble straight ahead, without caring if they talk rot. We disagree about plays, hopelessly. . . . How pretty this room is!" Margot looked round the familiar dining-room, while George tactfully filled her glass with champagne. He, like the room, had not changed. Margot glanced round her as she spoke. There was the ugly Kneller in its usual place, and the Cuyp in its great gold frame hanging above the sideboard. It looked rich and mysterious in the shaded candle-light, and the red coat of the huntsman in the right-hand corner of the canvas was hardly distinguishable. "It is cosy, isn't it?" Rachel admitted. "I haven't altered anything since mother died. It is just as it was. Upstairs, though, the changes have been revolutionary. I'm not nearly satisfied yet."

"Capricious!"

"Perhaps. But it is tremendously interesting trying experiments with rooms. It exercises one's imagination, and that is always a good thing. Let us go up and have our cigarettes and coffee. Then we must start. We ought to get settled in our seats a few minutes before she appears."

The drawing-room, which in Mrs. Elkington's time had always a touch of homeliness and was not innocent of framed photographs and mild Victorian water-colours, was now transformed out of recognition—a black carpet, pale cream-coloured walls, crimson curtains, broad divans which gave the room a vaguely Oriental appearance, crimson-shaded candelabra, and the gleaming black piano from the music-room. The room was all broad effects; there were no trumpery minute details. There were only six pictures on the walls, and they were all framed in black. They were strange pictures by Russian

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painters—pictures of Tartar hunting scenes; of yoked cheetahs held in lash; of saints playing on harps, the strings of which were stretched between earth and heaven; of warfare in the sky; of *morne*, unearthly landscapes, mysterious and violent, like a hurricane on canvas. Margot sank down on one of the divans by Rachel's side and gasped. "Fancy you having all this in your head and not telling me, Rachel!"

"Darling, I'm always getting new things into my head! You forget we haven't seen one another for ages until just recently. . . ."

They reached the music-hall where Genée was dancing just after the interval, and as she settled herself in the front of the box, Margot looked round the large house with curiosity. It was crowded with people; there seemed to be hardly an unoccupied seat anywhere to be seen, and the faces seemed much more eager and alert than the faces of the average theatre audience. A little haze of blue smoke rose up from stalls and circle; the occasional striking of matches and the hum of conversation suggested easiness and lack of constraint. The "turn" that was in progress did not strike her as being specially "artistic." Three well-built young Germans dressed in suits of sky-blue combinations, over which they wore pairs of silver, triangular-shaped bathing drawers, were busy throwing glittering wooden bottles at one another. Sometimes one of the three would collect all the bottles in one hand, and then they advanced smiling to the footlights, received some mild applause, and began to do something else. They were very muscular and perspiring and indefatigable. They seemed to throw the bottles at one another as hard as ever they could, and this ferocity seemed to please the audience. When they were not throwing bottles they jumped on one

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another's shoulders, making a kind of human tower, the supporting unit of which staggered breathlessly round the stage to the accompaniment of a long tattoo on the drums. Margot was glad when the tune to which their other manœuvres had been performed came to an end. The beating of the drums marked the culmination of the performers' efforts, and when it stopped they jumped off one another's shoulder's and advanced across the stage with outstretched hands and broad smiles. Then the red curtains swung together, obliterating them, and the flunkeys on either side of the proscenium put a fresh number into the stand.

"Here she is, darling," said Rachel. "She is dancing in Meyerbeer's 'Robert le Diable' to-night. You've seen Degas' picture. The present setting isn't in the least like the picture, though. . . ." The conductor, who had not put in an appearance for the acrobats, now emerged from under the stage, took his seat, and struck the stand twice with his bâton. During the first part of the ballet Margot was more occupied in watching her companion than in watching the great dancer she had come to see. A look of absorption and delight came over Rachel's face from the first moment of Genée's appearance. Margot looked, noticed the dancer's attractive *gamine* expression, the perky poise of her little head covered with pale gold hair, her extraordinary brilliance combined with something humorous and elfin in her expression, the marvellous way she "took the stage." The steps seemed to be almost miraculous—the pirouettings on her toes, the bendings backwards and forwards, and the sure-footed dartings in and out among the white-veiled nuns. But evidently Rachel was getting more out of the performance than she was. She envied her friend this capacity, which she perceived sprang largely from

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knowledge and a kind of mental cultivation. Rachel was not only musically well educated, but she had studied the art of dancing and had seen all the great dancers of her day. After a while Margot gave up observing Rachel and fixed her attention on Genée instead, until gradually the witchery of an astonishing personality caught hold of her and she forgot herself. The dancer's brilliance was like sunlight or the rippling of clear water; there was something sexless and unearthly about her. Margot resented the male Russian in "low-necked" black costume and large picture hat who assisted her to twirl; he seemed to spoil the illusion. She would have liked to go on watching Genée in the middle of the stage, alone, absorbing all the limelight, all the attention. This was her due, and she seemed to Margot to be the very incarnation of radiance and joyousness—happy laughter translated into movement.

At the end of the ballet Rachel appeared to wake up as from a trance; she had evidently completely forgotten Margot's presence. . . .

"She was dancing better than ever to-night," she said at last. "I am so glad you saw her for the first time at her very best. You know she is the greatest dancer of our generation," she remarked enthusiastically, as they drove back to Hyde Park Street. "There isn't anyone with the same range. She can do anything from the strictest classic dancing of the kind you saw to-night to the most modern brand of character dancing in an Empire ballet. And what an actress she is! Did you ever see such an expressive face?"

Rachel's enthusiasm opened new worlds of interest to Margot, and she could not avoid comparing it with Vernon's stilted approval of the higher drama.

"I can't think why on earth I've never been to a

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music-hall before," Margot remarked. "I am so grateful to you, Rachel, for taking me!"

They went upstairs to Rachel's bedroom to remove their wraps and to tidy themselves. Margot stood in front of the long cheval glass to study the effect of her frock.

"You vain beauty!" said Rachel, putting her arm round her waist. They stood looking at each other's reflection for a moment or two. They made a striking contrast. Margot fair and blue-eyed, rose-cheeked, with softly ripened bosom and narrow lips; Rachel tall and thin, with pale, ivory-white complexion and scarlet lips, and hair dark as night and dark liquid eyes. "We look like night and day or virtue and vice!" said Rachel with a laugh. They went down to the drawing-room, where George had put out for them a pint bottle of Clicquot and some delicious *foie gras* sandwiches, and Margot reflected that she had hardly ever spent such an amusing evening in her life before. It came over her with renewed force that half the things which she had hitherto fancied desirable were in reality dead, tedious, stupid. No wonder Rachel could not rouse herself to show any interest in her duchesses and her bazaars, in her petty, worthless ambitions which it cost her so much hard work and concentration to gratify!

When she had filled the two thin tumblers with champagne, Rachel moved across the room to the piano—with the gracefulness of a snake—and began Ravel's setting of "Le Gibet" out of "Gaspard de la Nuit." While her friend played Margot found that her thoughts flowed with extraordinary ease in pleasant and exciting channels. Her eyes also travelled round the room, taking in the details of its curious decorations—the cream-coloured walls, with the black-framed Stelletskys,

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Roerichs, and Von Anreps adorning them, the black carpet, the crimson curtains. Petrouschka, the old white borzoi, who was lying, paws out, by the fireplace got up, yawned, stretched himself, and walked slowly towards her, gazing at her with his sad northern eyes and putting up his long muzzle to be caressed. . . .

Margot did not want Rachel to stop playing. The music made her brain work, and she loved sitting in her comfortable chair and looking at the room, and watching her friend's long white hands floating over the black and white keys, and her absorbed, intent face—so pale and with such red lips—and her deep, hungry eyes. She felt that this evening marked a turning-point in her life. She knew she would never be satisfied any more with the existence she had been leading. She had been swimming, since her marriage, in a kind of golden soup-tureen; Rachel had come along, swung back the lid, and revealed to her a limitless heaven all ablaze with stars. . . .

Yet while she sat silently on a great black divan with crimson cushions thinking these thoughts and listening to Ravel's music, a vague feeling of oppression came over her. It was all, somehow, *too* exciting to enable her to feel at peace. The young red blood in her veins ran too quickly, too fiercely, for the exotic and rarefied atmosphere of the room. Rachel never used to be like this in the old days! Margot realised the fact that people, if they have anything in them, do not remain static but alter and develop; but, even so, she could not quite account for the change that had come over Rachel's character. Her whole nature now seemed subtly different from what she remembered it three years ago. It was as though she had taken some slow poison for the soul, which had given her a morbid and feverish

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animation; some insidious and deadly drug, which had gradually changed her from the gentle and refined girl whom she remembered into the half-mad æsthete who was sitting now at the piano.

Margot had an instinct that, keenly as Rachel interested her, something had happened to their friendship, to the old sympathy which had existed between them. And yet what an amusing time she had spent, and how she had enjoyed being taken to see Genée!

As soon as Rachel finished playing Margot got up to go. "My dear," she said, "I *have* enjoyed myself so much. I shall always be grateful to you for taking me to my first music-hall!"

There was a certain constraint in the way she uttered her polite phrases which did not escape Rachel's keen sensibility. They embraced one another, but Margot's cheeks were marble.

"By the way," Margot said, as her friend helped her with her cloak, "while I remember it, I wonder if you can give me Godfrey Levett's new address?" There was a momentary stiffening in Rachel's manner, and Margot wondered whether that long-established friendship were also beginning to wear thin.

"I had a letter from him yesterday, as it happens," Rachel replied, "but I can't for the life of me remember the address. I'll look it up for you, though, and send it to you to-morrow morning. I won't forget. Good-night, darling. I *am* so glad you've been amused!"

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CHAPTER XXII

RACHEL did not forget her promise. She looked up Levett's address and reported it to Margot's maid over the telephone. It was one of Margot's small "swanks" that she hardly ever used this instrument herself. Ernestine was always deputed to do the hanging on and to wait the "One moment, please." The address was 180 Soho Square, of all strange addresses. Levett had a flat there, apparently—great Queen Anne rooms with painted ceilings and elaborate chimney-pieces—rooms in which his pictures would be displayed to the finest advantage. Margot could easily imagine them. The walls of the whole flat would be equally divided between books and pictures. The carpets would be very thick, the chairs very deep. An air of almost tangible comfort would brood over the entire establishment. She remembered how Levett had always possessed the art of comfort. It was an art which seemed to give him an imperviousness that was like a challenge: it made him so independent of her sex. A woman could never hope to add anything (except her mere presence) to the charm of his surroundings. With so many men, all kinds of small details connected with their life displayed at once the fact that they needed a woman to show them how to live, what to spend their money on, and the kind of ties to refrain from wearing. But Godfrey Levett's mocking eye had always made her feel that in some way, in her clothes or manner, she had committed a faint indiscretion of taste, that she was subtly "all wrong" in a sense clearly visible to his eyes, though perhaps (fortunately!) not to other people's. No doubt it was this

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quality in him which had made her unable to forget him. She had never been able, by the help of her sex and of her beauty, to throw dust in his eyes as she had been able to throw dust in the eyes of almost all the other men with whom she had come in contact. He had always appraised her, if anything, at rather below her proper value. . . .

The idea of seeing him again began gradually to occupy her mind to the exclusion of everything else. She was excited at the thought of asking him what changes he noticed in her since her marriage, of finding out from him whether he approved of her clothes, of her "mental development." She felt more able now to meet him on his own ground than she had been before her marriage. She probably knew as much about London and Paris and about the "World" as he did. Then she remembered that the "World," with a capital letter, had never really interested him. *"Moi, J'aime le monde entier,"* he had once remarked to emphasise this point. He was very proud of the catholicity of his interests, his breadth of view. . . .

On the day he came to tea, as luck would have it, Vernon was at home. For some reason best known to himself Vernon liked meeting writers and artists. It was one of the most tiresome (because most insincere) things about him, that he affected to despise the men of his own type and to admire those who belonged to a world to which he was a stranger. It was part of his mania for having the *entrée* everywhere. He liked to feel that he could hold his own in "intellectual" circles and among writers and painters; that he would be welcomed by them with open arms if ever he should honour them by his presence. He had the saving grace to realise that the world contained many things besides

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those for which he himself happened to stand, but he did not realize his own limitations nor the precautions which Nature had taken to prevent him from straying out of his appointed groove.

Vernon had shown himself so "tiresome" after her dinner with Rachel that Margot felt it wise to humour him about Godfrey. In the agony which his love for her caused him on frequent occasions, she was only able to perceive an acute irritation which required "soothing." Since she had never loved, love's woes were things which she could neither sympathise with nor understand.

Levett seemed to have changed almost as much as she had herself. He had been in Italy, in France, and then in Spain, he said, during the past two years, and was glad to be back again in London among his friends. He loved loneliness in foreign countries, but too much of it palled after a while. The conversation was desultory and rather boring, but at moments she caught a stray gleam of interest in Godfrey's eyes which gratified her vanity; and once or twice he smiled, for her alone. He did not outstay the conventional twenty minutes, and when he rose to go, something titillated Margot's sense of humour as she heard herself, with Vernon making a kind of chorus in the background, saying, "You must come and have dinner with us one evening!" Their next meeting had already been arranged during a discussion about a picture show which had just been opened at the Cork Street Galleries. . . .

Godfrey Levett realised perfectly that Margot's casual, "We must go together one day soon," was not one of the vague suggestions made out of politeness and never intended to materialise. He was not surprised to get a note from her on the following day asking him if he

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would take her to the Cork Street Galleries on the coming Monday afternoon. He admired success in any direction or branch of human endeavour, and Margot's complete realisation of her ideals and desires delighted him. It was a success which he had himself prophesied, and this fact gave her an added interest in his eyes. He liked to feel that he had understood her so well, appraised her so justly.

The exhibition which had just been opened was a loan collection of Old Masters containing a curious medley of pictures, good, bad, and indifferent. Some rather important El Grecos were what chiefly interested Levett, since he had only recently returned from Toledo. He pointed out to Margot the strange note of occultism which pervades so many of El Grecos' pictures, how the painter was obsessed by the inner significance of his subjects, and seemed to see things not visible to ordinary eyes. "He has an almost harsh individuality, as though his soul were battling to express itself and his brain and hands were not quite equal to the task of putting down the message on the canvas. That would account for his occasional awkwardness and ugliness, as well as for his inspiration. He must have been a mystic—a kind of sixteenth-century Blake."

Margot listened to Godfrey with attention. During her three London seasons she had been to so many picture shows and had been forced to join in so many conversations about pictures that she had all the necessary jargon at the end of her tongue. She had a natural gift for making a smattering of information go a long way and a good head for proper names, so that she was often able to appear quite erudite. When Levett talked about pictures, however, she grasped that they were something more than just things about which, at the decree of

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fashion, it happened to be impossible to express ignorance or indifference. She realised dimly that art could be an intoxication, that pictures, like music, could supply a thrill to the soul; this glimpse of the truth which came to her as she listened to him increased her dissatisfaction with the people among whom, since her marriage, she had lived. Even dears like Vivie Nugent were utterly empty; there simply wasn't anything in them! Mr. Falkenheim, in those far-off days in Paris and in Richbourne Terrace, had done something to educate her appreciations. But his point of view had not been quite the same as Levett's; she had always been aware, intuitively, that he could never look at a painting without being conscious of its cash value. The enthusiasm was there, but it was not, as in Godfrey's case, perfectly "pure."

They stopped before a characteristic picture of St. Paul by the Cretan. "That isn't my idea of St. Paul," she said. "That man there, with his pointed brown beard and his thin arched nose, is simply a Spanish nobleman. He isn't St. Paul at all. St. Paul was some old Jew, with thick lips and a beard."

Godfrey disagreed with her, and they argued as to whether St. Paul might or might not have been handsome. Certainly he must at one time have been young. "To my mind," said Levett, "all the character in that portrait is in the eyes. In those eyes you can read the whole story of the 'conversion'; they are the eyes of a man who has seen a vision."

The El Grecos were beginning to get on Margot's nerves. She found the earth more comfortable, and went across to look at a "Venus" by Lucas Cranach. The face was like the face of some nameless animal, the low forehead suggested a serpent. Round the neck she wore

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a necklace of jewels, and in her hands held a transparent silk veil, as though to emphasise her nudity. There was something evil, something *macabre,* about this picture; and the same sinister spirit was noticeable in a picture by Hans Baldung Grein, called "La Volupté et la Mort," which hung by its side. "I didn't know they had any decadents in the fifteenth century." Margot said, looking at the painters' dates, which were given in the catalogue. "That Venus is far more wicked than anything of Beardsley's. She might as well be dressed in an ankle-watch or a man's top hat. Those jewels make her look just as naked . . . and even Beardsley didn't play such tricks with our anatomy!"

They went into the larger room, where there were several paintings by Frederigo Barocci, a painter of the School of Correggio, whose work was almost unknown to Levett. Both he and Margot were enchanted by his naïve Madonnas and Annunciations. There was something modern and tender about them, something gay and fresh. The painter was evidently an observer and a realist. He had noted the types in his native Urbino, and rendered them with simplicity and with a charm that was perhaps a trifle too honeyed for modern taste.

There were a number of other Italian pictures in the room—of the kind without which no Georgian mansion was considered complete. There were also six or seven Reynolds's portraits—sent up, the family treasure, from little country houses inhabited by maiden ladies—and some Romneys and Hoppners, which made the boom in these painters seem difficult to understand or to excuse. In the further room they admired a masterly Cuyp; two Goyas—portraits of Spanish ladies with black eyes, mantillas, shadowed upper lips, and fat hands adorned

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with wings—a Botticelli of great beauty but doubtful authenticity; some Bellinis and an exquisite Carpaccio.

"Do you remember the Goyas we looked at together in the Rue Laffitte?" Godfrey asked Margot with a smile. She glanced at him intently.

"Don't I!" she replied.

"No one can say that these exhibitions are not varied," Godfrey went on, changing the subject. "They are so varied that they are rather tiring. They open up so many different avenues of thought and interest at the same time."

"Let us go, then," Margot replied. "I'm absolutely exhausted. I want to see you and your new flat. You don't propose giving me tea in a tea-shop, I hope?"

"Yes, I did," said Levett. "I was searching in my head for the name of some really nice tea-shop. No one ever comes to tea in my flats! I told you when you came to Holland Street that you were the only female who had ever intruded into the sacred precincts!"

"That was one of the reasons why I liked coming. I don't want my tea in a tea-shop, so there!"

"Well, I won't answer for the kind of tea you'll get!" said Godfrey, laughing. "And you will have to let me show off my Spanish cabinet. I bought it in Seville for one hundred and fifty pesetas—the most wonderful piece of carving I've ever set eyes on, even in Spain!"

Levett's flat consisted of the two top floors of one of the most beautiful houses in Soho Square. The sitting-room, on the lower of the two floors, stretched the whole width of the house. Here he had hung the eighteenth-century pictures to which he was most attached, while his Spanish cabinet, alone in its glory, stood against the wall at the end, opposite the elaborate marble chimney-piece. Margot insisted on exploring the

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entire flat—she found herself instinctively looking for traces of an *amie,* and was baffled when she discovered none—and her admiration and delight were obviously genuine. "I think it's thoroughly selfish of you to keep such a lovely place hidden from your friends."

"It depends on the friends. You have penetrated, you see. But that is no reason why others should."

"Godfrey, you are trying to flirt with me!" said Margot sternly. They both laughed gaily; but Margot wondered whether he remembered their last meeting before her marriage—whether her remark had made him think of it, and what his thoughts would be.

"Well, Godfrey, so here I am, safely married, as you prophesied," she said, taking a puff at a cigarette which he had given her. Their relations seemed suddenly, for no tangible reason, to have taken on an air of intimacy during the last few moments. The comfort of the room and the gentle breeze which blew in from the square across the window-boxes full of geraniums seemed to be inviting confidences. The curious smell of the geraniums reminded Margot of the window-boxes at Richbourne Terrace when she had first come to London. She thought of an evening when Israel Falkenheim had showed her his Largillières, when she had gone out on the balcony for a few minutes to look at the stars and had caught the thrilling sounds of violins playing dance music. She had danced to that music ever since!

"I've changed a good deal, haven't I?" she said reflectively.

"No, you haven't changed," Godfrey replied. "You have developed, that's all, developed amazingly; but you are still the same you. You had the germ of what you are now in you three summers ago. You remember how I spotted it?"

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"Oh, yes, I remember!" said Margot. "And what is more, if you come to my dance on the Fourteenth you shall have your quail! . . . Tell me," she changed the subject abruptly, "have you seen anything of Israel Falkenheim lately?"

"I saw him yesterday for a moment in the Park. We walked a little way together, and as we did so Frensen passed. Do you know, fire seemed literally to blaze from both their eyes as they looked at one another. You have never seen anything so extraordinary. . . ."

Margot gave Levett an account—slightly modified, with additions to include her "official" story—of the circumstances which led to her departure from Richbourne Terrace. "Why do they hate one another so?" she asked.

Levett shrugged his shoulders. "They are both Renaissance figures; the two most romantic old men in London. If they had lived three centuries ago their retainers would fight desperately in dark alleys, or they would scheme to poison one another, or to murder each other's mistresses. As it is, all they can do is to scowl and plot financial ruin. The spectacle of two elderly gentlemen bashing in each other's pot hats with their umbrellas would be undignified, and they are neither of them that."

"Yes, but why did they quarrel?"

"Oh, Frensen, who was something of a Don Juan in his day, is supposed to have taken an unfair advantage of Mrs. Falkenheim when she was young and lovely. Mrs. Falkenheim is supposed to have told Israel all about it at once, and to have begged his forgiveness. He forgave her, but he has never forgiven Frensen. So you can understand why he could not forgive you!"

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"I've never heard of anyone hating as he hates," Margot remarked.

"What a lover he would have made!"

"Why?"

"What is hate except love turned the other way? Israel Falkenheim is a man for whom I have a great respect. The present age is almost empty of personalities. A man like Falkenheim is a godsend. He has something in him!"

"What a funny person you are! You've forgotten about me. You were looking through me and talking to yourself!"

"Was I? Let us talk about you. How do you like being a great lady?"

"Oh, I like it and I don't. It dawned on me last Wednesday, when Rachel asked me to go with her to see Genée dance, that I had never been to a music-hall before in my life. To-morrow I have to spend the entire day at the Duchess of Stretton's in Berkeley Square, keeping a stall at a charity bazaar. Those two facts should tell you all about it! At the bazaar I shall meet a fat German princess, who will probably 'take me up.' The duchess has already asked Vernon and me twice for the week-end. She has also dined at Charles Street, and calls me 'my dear' before the servants. So there you are—the profit and loss account up to date! How it is that I have never shouted a thoroughly indecent and unladylike word at the top of my voice at some refined gathering I can't imagine. But I haven't! I believe it is Rachel who is making me so discontented." She told Levett about her evening with Rachel, and fancied that he looked at her curiously while she did so. However, he made no comment beyond saying that she too had developed during the last three years. Then, reverting

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to her complaints about the bazaar, he said: "But why do you allow yourself to be bored, Margot, if you have nothing to gain from this bazaar?"

"I can't get out of it—can I?"

"Why not? I should have thought the greatest privilege of your position lay in the ability to do exactly as you please; you are answerable to nobody. It is strugglers, the poor, who have to consider appearances. Surely the one and only charm of *arriving* lies in the fact that it confers liberty of action, and thus comparative immunity from boredom."

Margot was thoughtful for a moment. Within the period of the past few days she had undergone an internal revolution. All her points of view had changed. It was certainly Rachel who had started it. She was no longer certain of what she wanted, and the fact of not having a definite end in view paralysed her. This bazaar had become utterly meaningless, and therefore unendurable. The situation reduced itself down to this, that she preferred the thought of going to music-halls with Rachel or with Godfrey, to see dancers like Genée, to being presented to princesses. The glamour had suddenly fallen from princesses. She saw them now as fat and boring women who talked broken English. She stood, as it were, bewildered—amid the dust of her illusions.

"Godfrey," she said, after a pause, "how can I get out of it?"

"Out of what?"

"That bazaar, of course. I simply can't face it; it will be so agonisingly dull. But what am I to do? I'm sharing the stall with Lady Abchurch. She will be frantic if I don't turn up."

Levett was thoughtful for a moment. "There is a luxurious nursing home in Belgrave Square," he said at

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last, "for those who find the social treadmill exhausting to the nerves. It is in the house that used to belong to the Duke of Taunton, on the opposite side of the square to Carl Frensen's house. Sir Harding Broadley runs it. It has quite a vogue, and I feel sure your husband could raise no objections to it. Why don't you retire there this evening? I will send you an enormous bouquet of roses! You can telephone from here to see if they can take you. Every woman can do with a few days' rest in the middle of the season. Now, don't you think that is a clever idea? You will be able to work off all sorts of visits to tiresome relations too. Instead of having to fag round to see them, you can now make them come to see you and get the nurse to dismiss them at the end of ten minutes!"

"Godfrey, you are a genius!" said Margot. "How do you think of these things?"

"Sheer interest in the art of life," Levett replied, laughing.

Margot, whose motto was invariably "do it now," went to the telephone and rang up Sir Harding Broadley. The arrangements were astonishingly easy to make. The nursing home was as delighted to receive her as she was to retire to it.

"I must go and pack. I *have* enjoyed my afternoon." She looked into his mocking grey eyes and wished she could disturb their detachment and tranquillity. Any other man would be a little sentimental at this juncture; and she remembered the way he had kissed her before her marriage. What would she do if he tried to kiss her again? She felt vaguely annoyed with him for not deciding this point for her by making the attempt.

"I wonder why you have never married. You ought to!"

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"What has the race of women done to deserve that favour?" Levett replied derisively. "I am, as you see, comfortable. I am free to come and go as I please, and I am free to love without spoiling the romance by domesticity. Of course, if some goddess were to come to me and ask my advice as to how she should dispose of herself and of her millions, I might reconsider things. My income, though almost enough for one, is not quite adequate to my imagination; but otherwise——"

"I should think you would make a woman who loved you die of mortification!"

"Ah, love! Love is so rare and the market is so overstocked with forgeries! Friendship and passion are safer, and one can enjoy both without putting one's head in the noose. Marriage as an institution is arranged exclusively for the benefit of the female sex!"

"You are a shy bird, Godfrey. And you are not so much to look at either! And you are frightfully vain! I should have thought some little flattering fool would have caught you that way."

"I know I'm vain. But don't you give me credit for having a few gleams of humour? It's a protection."

"I must go off to my nursing home now," said Margot. "Be sure to come and have tea with me there to-morrow afternoon."

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE episode of the nursing home marked a definite stage in Margot's career. She had been amazed at the ease with which the whole business had been worked. The duchess had been charming. A bouquet of white roses accompanying a letter of regret had come to her from Berkeley Square, while Cynthia had called and told her all about the bazaar which she had been so successful in avoiding. "Lady Abchurch was as sick as a dog when she heard you couldn't turn up," Lady Cynthia remarked. "She had only intended to be there for an hour in the afternoon; but as it was, she had to be on duty all day!" This item of information gave Margot intense satisfaction, and she retailed it to Levett with a chuckle when, half an hour later, he paid his promised visit.

"The first fruits of emancipation!" he said, laughing. "London has caught a Tartar in you, I can see!" She watched his keen grey eyes resting on her as he lay back comfortably in the armchair. His regard seemed to be kinder, more affectionate than usual; but the fire she longed to see blazing in his glance was still unlit. But he liked her, that she knew, and this very "liking" was in itself a challenge. . . .

Among the most assiduous of Margot's visitors during her stay at Sir Harding Broadley's nursing home—not counting Vernon, who was in attendance daily—was Sir Carl Frensen. He used often to come over from his house on the other side of the square to see her. He came on the afternoon before her departure, his visit

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just coinciding with the end of Vernon's, whom he passed on the doorstep.

"Well, Margot," he said, settling himself in the armchair. "I shall miss you when you go away from Belgrave Square!" His insolent red eyes examined her as she lay in bed, dressed in a Japanese silk dressing-gown and propped up by pillows, with her pale gold hair framing her vivid face. With a bowl of white roses on the table by her side, she made a picture that would have charmed any eye, male or female. "You certainly look your best in bed, my dear," Sir Carl remarked. "I believe that someone once said that the three most beautiful sights in the world were a woman in bed, a priest at the altar, and a thief on the gallows."

"I don't know about thieves on gallowses," said Margot, laughing. "Just think of all your city pals strung up in a row, toes out, their top hats falling over their Hebraic noses! I wouldn't call it exactly a *beautiful* sight, though of course it would do the world a great deal of good."

Sir Carl chuckled wheezily as he watched Margot. He adored her impertinence, and her gibing attacks were the secret of her hold over him. He would have enjoyed being hit over the head by her with an umbrella or having his ears boxed.

"What an important person you are become now," he said. "I read in the paper the other day all about your regretted absence from the Duchess of Stretton's bazaar. You are finding matrimony a success, eh?"

"Success!" flashed Margot. "Well, yes! I suppose it is," she went on, listlessly, leaning her head back on the pillows. "But if I had a fortune of my own I might feel tempted to chuck it. Vernon does his best, of course. . . ."

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"But respectability palls! What did I tell you? If you had listened to me you would have had your fortune and you would have been a free woman!"

"Ah, how am I to know that?" said Margot, laughing. "After all, you let me down good and proper with the Falkenheims. If I hadn't scrambled out of that mess with my own claws, where should I have been?"

Carl Frensen's face darkened. "No, you are quite right there," he said. "I didn't treat you fairly. But I'll make it up to you yet, you see if I don't. I'll make it up to you, you pretty cat!"

They exchanged glances, and the look of amusement came back into the old man's face. He looked at her in the same way as he looked at his beautiful Persian, Drusilla. The more she scratched him and bit him, the more she amused him and the more he liked her. He hoped she would never have her claws cut.

Margot always enjoyed the old man's visits. In her own way she liked him as well as she liked anyone she knew, with the exception of Godfrey Levett. He knew the world so well, and was so interesting. He was a man who counted for something; he was rich in a way which made the Stokes's wealth seem nothing, and he was famous—one of the ablest men of his day. She was never bored when she was with him, for she loved to be with men who dominated her morally and intellectually—who were stronger than she was. The sensation of knuckling under she found on occasions as delightful as the sensation of trampling people beneath her. How tired she was, really, of snapping at Vernon! Vernon came to see her every morning immediately after breakfast—to receive his orders for the day—and she delighted in speaking harshly to him, particularly in front of the

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nurses. He would bite his moustache and say nothing, but give renewed instructions to the management that she was to be saved all worry and that everything she wanted was to be done for her.

"And she treats him like dirt, too," one of the maids remarked to the footman, summing up the situation. "You should just 'ear the way she talks to 'im in the morning. Vulgar little upstart! If I was 'im I wouldn't stand 'er airs, that I wouldn't!"

Vernon, however, had no intention of not standing them. If he had any such intention Margot would have been the first to perceive it, and would have modified her behaviour accordingly. After leaving the nursing home, she did indeed treat Vernon rather better than usual. She had always liked his good looks, his bronzed skin and beautiful teeth, and now that she had made such strides in the art of living—thanks to Rachel and to Godfrey Levett—she had no one but herself to blame if she was bored or irritable. She felt like a bird let out of its cage during the remainder of the season. By pleading ill-health—the rest in the nursing home proved invaluable in this connection—she avoided all the social engagements which were in the smallest degree tedious, and did only the things which happened to amuse her. It was a revelation to her how different life became. Money was, *par excellence*, the desirable thing in life, now that she knew so well what to do with it, and "position," with its accompanying meetings with duchesses and princesses, took an altogether secondary place.

The new spirit that was rising up within her did not commend itself to Vernon. He himself enjoyed being intentionally rude on occasions, but he looked on this haughtiness as being a masculine attribute, and he did

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not like his wife to be masculine. The Abchurchs were Patcham's relatives, and the fact that Lady Abchurch was *froissée* with Margot was, to say the least, inconvenient. She would have made such a good friend, too, for Margot. Lady Abchurch was a clever, interesting woman who knew the world and had considerable political influence. Some of Vernon's neighbours at Hotham had asked him why he did not offer himself as Unionist candidate for the division. After all, one would have to do something, he reflected, and Lady Abchurch might have been useful.

Margot's choice of friends had always vaguely displeased him and had occasionally aroused his jealousy. Beyond her beauty, he could not imagine what a clever man like Godfrey Levett could see in his wife to make him prefer her to himself. He flattered himself that he was interested in all the things in which Levett was interested; Margot, on the other hand, only cared about social frivolity. And then there was that poisonous cat, Rachel Elkington, and Carl Frensen. . . . He thought of the letter from Mr. Falkenheim about his wife, which he had found on his father's writing-table on the evening of his death. Falkenheim, Frensen—how was it that Margot came to be mixed up with these alien financiers? Now that she had the chance of living exclusively among white people, why could she not drop them? She had given up the Falkenheims, it was true, but this man Frensen was far worse than they were. His thoughts tortured him, and he could not forget the day when he had passed Sir Carl on the doorstep of the nursing home, making for his wife's bedside. As he had very little to occupy him, the thought of Frensen became an obsession, and he listened to any lying nonsense about the financier that was poured into his ears at his club or

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in the houses of his friends. Several times he determined to assert himself, to forbid Margot to see Frensen again. But she made it almost impossible for him to do this by always telling him about their meetings and making a point of relating in great detail what he had said, as though it were a matter of equal interest to them both. She certainly did not speak or behave like a guilty woman, and without some valid excuse for doing so he could not bring himself to make a scene or to try to interfere with her liberty. He did not want her to think that he mistrusted her; but he would have welcomed an opportunity for giving her good advice if he could have managed it without incurring her displeasure.

Margot certainly had the knack of occupying people's thoughts, and it was as well for Vernon that his education and upbringing had given him an impassive mask and facial self-control. Otherwise the spectacle he would have presented to the world, instead of being that of a slightly mature Adonis, would have been the spectacle of a bewildered, love-tortured, and wretched man, battling, without guidance, against circumstances that were too much for him. He was grateful when the season came to an end and he could hurry North to shoot grouse amid the excitements and chatter of Glenthorwald. Glenthorwald Castle, in Argyllshire, was the Scottish home of Lord Patcham's parents, who took their title from this estate. The old people loved Glenthorwald, and would have liked to live there nearly the whole year round. Their affection for their only son, however, exceeded their love for the barren ancestral acres with their haunting vistas of mountain and loch; and it was to please him more than for any other reason that they came to London in the summer and invited to stay with them in August a "crowd of noisy Londoners,"

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of whom, for a good many years past, Vernon, had always been one. He was a very good shot and quite at his best as one of a party in a big country house.

Margot had gone to Glenthorwald with him at the end of their first year of married life, but though she loved the wild scenery and enjoyed the long days on the yacht, cruising among the intricate waterways and winding arms of the sea, the visit on the whole bored her. She found her host and hostess oppressive; and the young people either empty or absorbed in things for which she cared nothing. This year she felt she could not face Glenthorwald again, and she and Vernon parted company, Margot having arranged to spend August at Deauville with Vivie Nugent and some other congenial friends.

Vernon was glad of the rest which Glenthorwald gave him; but in a very little while he was worrying about Margot, wondering what mischief she was getting herself into at Deauville, and longing for September to come, when they would be together again at Hotham. He would make a great effort to win back his wife, who instinct, rather than any conscious reasoning, told him was gradually slipping further and further away from him. Surely, when she felt herself to be a member of a big family, as she would at Hotham when his relatives were staying there, she would sober down, would realise more fully her obligations? He would appeal to her good feeling, and at Hotham she could hardly fail to realise what a fine position he had conferred on her. It was to his wife's realisation of the side on which "her bread was buttered" that he pinned all his hopes.

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CHAPTER XXIV

MARGOT liked Hotham, with reservations. It was charming to run down there for the week-end, and it would have been equally delightful to live there tranquilly, without visitors. To spend September there, entertaining her husband's relatives, after the mad excitements of Deauville spent in the company of a dare-devil like Vivie Nugent, was quite another matter. She felt she needed a complete rest and absolute quiet, as though the most agreeable thing in the world would be to be alone among strangers, or alone with someone for whom she cared—a lover. She never was alone now, never had been alone—with the exception of the ten days she spent in Sir Harding Broadley's nursing establishment—since she had married. Even when she and Vernon stayed in different houses, she always seemed to be in the midst of a chattering crowd.

At Hotham she had continually to be up and doing; she had no real peace. Most of the work of superintending the household was taken off her hands by Miss Austerley—Miss Aust*ere*ley, as Margot persisted in calling her—who had filled this position at Highmere; but as Margot had the instincts of a good hostess, and her husband's mother and grandparents were paying the yearly visit, she found herself continuously occupied. General Cornewall had to be gossiped with when he was not out shooting with the younger men, and the approaching meals had all to be discussed with him in detail. Mrs. Cornewall required someone on whom to air her scandalous reminiscences; and decency made it impossible for

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Margot not to devote herself during some part of the day to her mother-in-law.

Patcham and Joyce, who had been prevailed on by Margot to come for a week to mitigate "the parents," amused themselves with ease, since marriage had not yet begun to bore them, and Margot often looked rather enviously in their direction. The surroundings of Hotham Place were wilder and less park-like than Highmere, less "poisonously well-kept," as Patcham put it. The trees were old, and there was a long, winding lake in front of the house ending in a thickly wooded dell through which passed the stream which fed it. But, in spite of its many beauties, Margot never came to have the affection for either the house or lands of Hotham which she had felt for Kingsworth. Whenever she was at Hotham she thought of Kingsworth and of the golden August days she had spent there before she took her plunge into matrimony. She had seen the Hendersons reasonably often since her marriage; and she invited them to motor over for dinner and to spend the night, in order to meet General and Mrs. Cornewall. General Cornewall and Mary's father had been great friends. Margot thought Adam had grown sleeker and fatter than ever. And what had happened to Mary? Which of them had changed? Somehow the unvaried *répertoire* of Mary's interests had become strangely tedious. Margot noticed small defects of character in her friend for the first time, and began to wonder whether, after all, Mary were not degenerating into the proverbial parson's wife and might not have invested in a pair of elastic-sided boots. She reproached herself for her disloyalty, but she could not help being impatient over the good works—the village crèche, the reading-room, and the rural suffrage meetings. It seemed now almost incredible that Mary should escape

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becoming a prig. But while Mary seemed to have grown duller, Adam had correspondingly improved. His sense of humour was mellower, his pomposity better managed. Margot thought he must have exchanged some of his bad qualities for his wife's good ones! As she watched them during dinner, she wondered whether, in the same way, she would find that the glamour had fallen from her beloved Kingsworth, supposing she accepted Mary's invitation and revisited it. To make impossible anything so distressing, she determined to make some excuse to get out of going. She cherished the memories of those lovely August days, and did not want anything to tarnish them. Even Danbury, with his absurd, boyish passion, had a charm for her in retrospect. Alas! he had grown into a very commonplace young man, and had just been gazetted to a Guard regiment. His people's place was not far from Hotham, and he often came over to dine with them. The sight of him would carry her back to the wonderful days when she was still on the threshold of life, when none of her dreams had been turned into realities. How distance lent them an enchantment! Did she regret them? Perhaps. She did not know. If she had known what she knew now, would she have married Vernon? A year ago she would have laughed at herself for asking this question; but now things were different. Marriage had awakened in her a hunger for a mutual passion such as she had never known. In making her a woman it had developed in her a woman's desires. These desires were sometimes fierce enough to trouble and confuse her mind, and to weaken her determination, in a way which before her marriage would have been impossible. The things which had been vague before were now precise. It had never occurred to her, before she married Vernon, that he could ever have any object

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in life except to make himself useful. But now she felt growing up in her, particularly when she was at Hotham, a tiresome sense of responsibility which choked her. The dead weight of the family, of her position as Vernon's wife, of the house and the neighbours, overpowered her. She felt herself hedged in, caged. It seemed that she could not have both "position" and liberty. The two things were mutually exclusive. The position to which she had climbed brought with it duties which could not be shirked. She thought of Godfrey's comfortable travels in Italy, France, and Spain; of his luxurious but manageable flat; his complete freedom to come and go; his indifference towards her which did not blind her to his admiration; his critical and humorous eyes. She found herself constantly comparing him with her husband, comparing his spontaneity with Vernon's wooden reserve, a reserve imposed by a terror of being ridiculous. Vernon sometimes seemed to be sick and ill with love for her; he watched her day and night, and was "deeply hurt" by the least thing. His thoughts were so plainly concentrated on her that she could often have screamed with irritation. But she sometimes bored Godfrey, or was, at least, afraid of doing so. How much more exciting that made him! She could not imagine Levett ever becoming tedious as a companion, and the memory of the time when he had kissed her, before her marriage, made all her nerve-centres tingle with excitement. She was thinking of him more intently than usual one starry night towards the end of September, when she was walking on the lawn after dinner, on the arm of Vernon's grandfather. As she looked at the blackness of the trees in the shadow cast by the moonlight, at the yellow glow streaming out from the windows of the house, she reflected that if she were only clutching Godfrey's arm he

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would lead her away till they were both swallowed up in the starlit mystery of the night. And he would be fierce and masterful with her; and oh, the joy that it would be to submit!

"Won't you catch cold, my dear?" Mrs. Cornewall called out to her from the drawing-room window. She had looked at her husband first, but he was—as usual—well wrapped up in his woolen muffler. There was something in Mrs. Cornewall's voice which suggested a quavering senility, and made Margot furious. Her thoughts had just gone on such a thrilling voyage! She agreed that it was cold, and took the General back into the saloon and, in desperation, started a game of auction bridge with Patcham, Joyce, and Lady Stokes. Joyce and Patcham were at least young, and their laughter was infectious. Margot felt a resentment against old women. They were such ties. If one liked them one had to do things for them—to upset oneself. Old men, of course, were different. She was heartily glad she would only have to endure the parents for another two days. They were returning to Clevedon at the end of the week, and then they would be done with until next year—if they lived another year! It would be a relief to be rid of them, though she would miss the General, for whom she had a sincere affection. Her mood changed, and she began to reflect what a kind and tolerant and amusing old couple the Cornewalls were. If only Vernon had as much sense as his grandad, how very much easier he would be to live with! She gave up playing cards after the end of the second rubber and went into the library to talk to the General about the dinner for to-morrow night. She found the old man, with spectacles on nose, reading an American cookery

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book called "1001 Salads, with a Chapter on Hors d'Œuvres." He looked serious and absorbed.

"You know, Margot," he roared, looking up at her, "your cook does not understand hors d'œuvres in the least! Those anchovies to-night were poor, and you had the wrong kind of olives, and I've never seen a good *salade russe* at your table. You must come out shopping with me one day. I always buy cheap and I always buy good. You ask Perkins, my fishmonger!"

Margot smiled, thinking of Vernon's story of the old man lifting a turbot from its slab in Perkins's shop and sticking his thumb into it to see if it were tender.

General Cornewall loved his granddaughter-in-law for the little attentions she showed him. Margot was always perfectly reckless with the wine cellar during his visits, sending for the finest and rarest ports and sherries which had been laid down by Vernon's father, for him to taste and appraise. Often he would reject them with scorn, telling Vernon that such stuff ought to be put down the sink. Sir William had been no judge of wine himself, and had often been badly advised.

"Never could cure your father of buying his wine at Markillie and Johnson's, Vernon," General Cornewall would roar. "If he had only listened to me he would never have been landed with stuff like this!"

When he was not out with the guns or pottering about the estate, the old man would sit at his writing-table for hours, sending small doles to indigent gentlewomen for whom he entertained feelings of paternal affection. He collected odd lots of penny stamps and postal orders for small sums, and filled his pockets with them, so that when he came to write his letters he had something to slip into each letter. And he was never happy, even

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when away from home, unless he could be giving orders to his favourite grocer, cake-maker, or wine merchant. He would send postal cards ordering a bottle of port to be sent to one friend, two tubs of extra special anchovies to another, a ginger-bread cake, made according to a unique recipe by a small pastry-cook at Wigan, to a third.

While the General occupied himself in ministering to the stomachs of his needy *protegées,* his wife or Vernon's mother would accompany Margot on a round of village calls. The villagers of Hotham all adored Mrs. Cornewall and her daughter; they regarded Margot with politeness, but without enthusiasm. She realised how it would take her years to get to know them as her mother-in-law, for instance, knew them. And even then it would not be the same. She would never like these Hotham people as she had liked the villagers at Kingsworth. They did not seem to have the same touch of fineness which she had noted in people like John Vile and Mrs. Holden and the enchanting Rosie. They were too greedy, too independent and cunning to please her. But her mother-in-law and Mrs. Cornewall were familiar with them and liked them. The villagers in whom Margot was most interested were a family of bad gipsies called Lee, who lived in a tumble-down cottage overlooking a deserted sand-pit. It was not a specially old cottage, but had been built at the beginning of the nineteenth century by General Cornewall's father, for the overseer of some works which had proved unsuccessful. The ruined brick walls of the factory were still standing, and inside them some rusty ironwork could be seen amid the stinging nettles and rank weeds. The Lee family had "squatted" in this cottage ever since the works had been abandoned, and had never paid any rent. They were not real gipsies, or they could not have lived under

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a roof, but they were a strange, swarthy race with white teeth and black eyes, noted for their wickedness. The men wore corduroys and thick leather belts, and they were known to carry knives. The family consisted of a father and mother, eight sons, and one lovely daughter of eighteen. Mrs. Cornewall went to visit them with Margot on the afternoon before her return to Clevedon, and on their way she told Margot how John Lee, the grandfather of these boys, had once caught hold of her in the north wood at Hotham, when she was picking wood anemones there as a little girl, and had kissed her, and how he had laughed at her with his white teeth as she fled screaming. She had run away, but she had never told anyone about it because he was so handsome. "And are they not splendid men, his grandsons?" she said. When they reached the cottage they noticed two of the sons lurking slyly on the outskirts of the wood at the back of the house, while they waited for Mrs. Lee to open the door. "They are like beautiful animals, do you see?" said Mrs. Cornewall, her old eyes bright with interest and amusement. "Look at their thick necks rising like pillars out of their broad chests. And watch the way their muscles ripple when they bend their bodies. That is Jim over there, the one who is sawing the log. He reminds me of a leopard, and the whole family are like splendid wild beasts! Vernon had to give Jim two months at the Quarter Sessions for knifing a man down in the village. And they are dreadful thieves. For three generations they have lived by stealing. There is a tradition that our family is always lenient to these handsome blackguards; but Vernon had to break it at last, and I expect Jim was very angry!"

Margot looked in the direction of the gipsy as one

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looks at some dangerous but impotent monarch of the jungle at the Zoo, wondering what further evil he would accomplish if he got the chance.

At dinner Margot referred to the gipsies, affecting to make light of their villainies. But Vernon seemed to regard them as dangerous people, while Danbury, who had motored over that evening, agreed with him. As Danbury and Vernon exchanged cryptic remarks about the Lees, Margot felt rather annoyed. They made her feel an outsider. There was a kind of freemasonry between these Somerset people; they were secretive even about their villains.

"But what is it the Lees could do, Danbury?" Margot asked. "There is never any crime about here, surely, excepting a little thieving now and then. . . ."

"Oh, Somerset is a great county for murders; didn't you know that?" Danbury replied. "There are many odd, wild folk in Somerset. In certain parts of the county the vendetta flourishes almost as successfully as in Albania! There are a good many families like your Lees—we have one in our village. They are nasty folk. And there was a family of gipsies that I never liked the look of, in Minsterham—where poor old Captain Walters and his wife were shot a couple of years ago. No one ever discovered who the murderer was. . . ." The conversation could not be shifted from the unpleasant topic, and everyone had something to say about Captain Walters. Mrs. Cornewall remarked *en passant* that his wife was "an interfering cat who deserved to have her neck wrung"—she had a partiality for gipsies, murderers or not—and the General remembered Captain Walters as a subaltern in India. There had been an attempt made on his life out there. . . . He was an unlucky man; there was a curse upon him. He had

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profaned a temple, or in some other way annoyed the natives.

Margot was not much amused by all this gossip concerning people she knew nothing about, and for whom she cared less, and tried to give the conversation a general turn.

"It is difficult to imagine murders being committed nowadays. I suppose they *do* happen occasionally; but cheap novels have made even the accounts of them in the newspapers seem unreal," she remarked. "They seem so old-fashioned; and yet I suppose the lust to kill is still part of human nature."

"Murder hasn't been disinfected off the face of the earth by a long chalk, Margot," Danbury replied. "Don't you believe it! All that has happened is that we have become more subtle. We don't cut the victim's throat nowadays. We ruin him; rob him of friends, money, and reputation; poison his wife and his relatives against him; cheat him out of attaining whatever it is that he has set his heart on. It takes longer than the old way, but the vengeance is more complete!"

Danbury spoke with a peculiar and rather painful vehemence, and Margot looked at him in surprise. He was the same odd creature that he had been at Kingsworth, in spite of the fact that Mary Henderson's influence had to some extent sterilised his morbidity, while Sandhurst had given him an outward veneer of similarity to the recognised pattern. But there was an intensity in his nature, of which the scuffles with pretty housemaids at Kingsworth had only been one manifestation among many.

During the silence which fell on the dinner-table, Margot looked at the slowly moving jaws of General Cornewall who was still stolidly munching, while the re-

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mains of various courses made his beard unlovely. Joyce looked thoughtful, and unusually quiet for one who was, as a rule, so animated. Patcham looked uncomfortable, and Vernon characteristically impenetrable. That impenetrable mask; how well Margot knew it! And what was behind? A baby boy sitting obstinately among his toys and snapping at his nurse!

The butler broke the tension of the moment by bringing in a telegram for Margot on a salver. She took it and laid it carelessly by the side of her plate. Mrs. Cornewall had by this time begun to talk to Vernon about the new garage, and the conversation becoming general, Margot did not ask leave to open the brown envelope. Her mother-in-law noticed this, and accounted it to her for virtue; on the whole, Margot had better manners than she had expected or dared to hope for.

Margot was glad when dinner came to an end and the women were able to escape from the room. Something had jarred her, and she dated her discontent from the moment when Danbury had made his remark about murders. Was she being cruel to Vernon? But why should she not be cruel to him? Life is a battle, and he was better equipped than she was for the struggle. He had youth, wealth, position, good looks. If he could not look after his own happiness the sooner he learnt to do so the better. Her thoughts absorbed her, so that she forgot about the envelope in her hand.

"Why, Margot," said Joyce, laughing, "you haven't bothered to open your telegram. I thought females were supposed to be curious!"

"Good heavens!" said Margot, "I forgot all about it." She tore open the envelope and read the contents with knitted brows.

Then she looked up and met her mother-in-law's

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friendly and inquiring eyes. "It is from one of Sir Carl Frensen's servants or from his solicitor," she said. "The old man is very ill, and has asked me to be sent for before he dies. I must go up to-morrow morning."

There was a little chorus of "Oh, my dear, how dreadful!" from the three women in their different voices. But Margot did not listen to conventional expressions of sympathy. She was interested in a look—hard as steel—which came suddenly into the eyes of Vernon's mother at the sound of Carl Frensen's name. The two women, in a flashed glance, strove to penetrate the secrets of one another's hearts. Neither of them was successful.

"I must tell Vernon to let me have the car to-morrow," Margot remarked calmly.

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CHAPTER XXV

GODFREY LEVETT had grown so attached to his flat in Soho Square that he did not care to be long away from it. He was tired of wandering about, and wanted to settle down to work at his new play. An excuse for returning to London before the end of September was provided by Israel Falkenheim, who had written to tell him of some examples of the macabre, erotic art of Félicien Rops that were to be offered for sale at Christie's. He suggested that they should go to look at them together, though he should not do any bidding himself. He was hardly the man to buy Rops; but they would amuse a bachelor like Levett!

The return to London also would bring him nearer Margot Stokes, of whom he found himself constantly thinking. What a dazzling witch she was! There was something stinging and bitter about her personality that was painful, yet alluring. And how she had triumphed over circumstances, had pushed on, battled and schemed, and yet had remained always gay as well as hard. The fire of life in her burned fiercely and steadily; her poor husband was scorched by it. Levett thought of what Vernon must suffer at Margot's hands, but his sympathy was not unmixed with contempt. He had no mercy for men who succumbed to feminine lures. Women were only enchanting when they were slaves—conquered and abject, but with a pretty pretence of surface wilfulness. He believed that the twentieth century would see the long-delayed reassertion of the ascendancy of Man. Nineteenth-century feminism was already *vieux jeu;* the suffragettes had given it its death-blow. The "advanced

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woman" of to-day was beginning to realise in her inmost heart how much healthier and more natural were sex relations in the dark ages—that even the Turk is not so black as he is painted. The only kind of emancipated woman with whom Levett had any sympathy was Rachel's kind, and she, he reflected, was half a man and had a man's brain. As for the bespectacled battalions who fill up all the most convenient desks in the British Museum Reading Room, they were too pathetic even to be ridiculous. The women with whom he chose to occupy his thoughts were women like his own mother—with her soft voice, her little tricks of gesture, and her jokes, which had made his home charming and his memory of it a dear possession. Then there were all the women who added to the joy of life—women who were accomplished, intuitive, voluptuous; whose clothes were a delight to the eye; whose minds, by their strange qualities of feminine intuition, could illuminate all kinds of subjects with a peculiar radiance. Then there were the inspirational women, and, rarest of all, the women who loved, not like the animals, merely exercising natural instincts, but with the heart and soul —the women who would give all for love, and who, giving all, would receive all in return. He did not believe such women existed nowadays, nor men worthy to mate with them; but they were an ideal type. Meanwhile, the chief miseries of modern women he ascribed to the fact that they were without masters. The word "obey" was not only left out of the marriage service—to the accompaniment of a great deal of newspaper advertisements—but out of life also. And this, in his observation, seemed to act like a poison on the temperament of the average woman, doing far more than "higher education" to turn her into a prig. The mind

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of woman seemed to him to flourish in subjection, and her most supreme happiness to come from abnegation. To a world which is not decadent the man is master of the woman, Levett thought, and he cherished Zarathustra's advice: "Thou who goest to women, forget not thy whip!" He looked on man as the clean, the honest, the romantic sex. To him woman, the inferior animal, was only worshipful when, of her own will, she stepped gracefully into the second place. Though she might occasionally ply the whip, she must not seize the reins. He and Rachel would argue with gusto about these points by the hour together, enjoying their irreconcilable divergence of opinion. They were always vaguely aware of some point of mutual sympathy in the midst of their wranglings, without, however, being able to define exactly what it was.

Levett met Rachel while on his way to lunch with Israel Falkenheim at the Savoy. She was looking in the window of a book-shop in the Charing Cross Road, where some reproductions of Bakst's drawings of Nijinsky were exhibited.

"I am going to spend five guineas on a book about the Russian ballet, Godfrey," she said when they had greeted one another. "I'm now enjoying the pleasures of anticipation, like a child outside a sweet-shop. You shall come in and support me!"

When the book was bought and paid for they walked on together for a little while, and Levett told her that he was lunching with Mr. Falkenheim. The mention of Mr. Falkenheim set them thinking of Margot.

"I suppose Margot Stokes is not back in London yet?" Godfrey asked. Rachel did not know, and there was something in her voice as she said this which brought home to him how their friendship had deteriorated since

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the days when this girl, who still interested them so strongly, first dawned on London. He wondered if Rachel's friendship for Margot had similarly cooled off. He himself was a very faithful friend, and sensitive to any coolness or indifference on the part of people for whom he cared. When they reached St. Martin's Church he had an opportunity of watching Rachel unnoticed whilst he was hailing a taxi for her. He thought he observed a different look in her eyes from any that used to be there a year ago. She was harder, more self-reliant, and paler; her eyes were brighter and more liquid, and at the same time hungrier.

"Come and have tea with me next Tuesday, Godfrey," Rachel said, as she gave him her thin, gloved hand. "It is a long time since we made our famous onslaughts on each other's sexes! Come early; with any luck I shall be alone."

When she had gone he avoided the unpleasantness of walking in the Strand, a thoroughfare which he detested, and drove to the Savoy, where Mr. Falkenheim was waiting for him. Godfrey was delighted to see the old man again, and they plunged quickly into the subject which formed their common ground of interest. The younger man liked his elder's elaborate courtesies. Mr. Falkenheim had in a curious way the "grand manner" at the luncheon-table. Luncheon was a meal which he understood thoroughly, and Levett always felt, after having been his guest, as though he had just had a conference with an ambassador. They went off afterwards to the galleries in Pall Mall, where the collection they had come to see was being shown before the auction. The collection had been made by a famous Oxford don, recently dead, and was being hastily dispersed by his

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executors, who were simultaneously ashamed of it and anxious to profit to the full.

As they drove along the crowded Strand, the damp, rather biting, autumnal breeze came in through the open window of the car and made Levett shiver. The air seemed to call him to a life of action, seemed to urge him to leave this continual art. What was art, after all, compared with life? He was going to look at pictures of beautiful women seen in moments of intimacy —half-undressed after a ball, with the powder still on their cheeks; on the point of entering the bath, or lying lazily on their beds. That passion on Rops's part to show beauty holding a bath sponge or standing in front of a cheval glass clad only in a pair of black silk stockings and man's top hat—all that, he felt, was nothing but the desire on the part of the artist to get away from the atmosphere of "art". . . .

When they reached the galleries Levett realised how, all the time, at the back of his head, he had been thinking of Margot Stokes, visualising her in a thousand different positions—emerging from her car with rich furs over her shoulders; entering a ballroom with the same magnificent shoulders proudly bare; smiling; shaking hands; glancing backwards. He knew he would rather a thousand times have talked to Israel Falkenheim about Margot—living, tangible, one of God's masterpieces—than about all the dusty canvases in the world, whose authorship was open to question. He suffered one of his periodic moods of irritation against his own absorption in life's mere accessories. The keen autumn air had started it, and now that he found himself in the long galleries, where numbers of attractive women in their new furs were walking up and down, so full of psychological possibilities, he felt a sensation of revolt. He

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listened, with one ear, while Mr. Falkenheim talked, with considerable point and knowledge, about Armand Rassenfosse; about the Musée Moderne in Brussels, with its wonderful Alfred Stevens's; about Rops's celebrated "Venus," and about that heady *odor di femina* which impregnates all the Belgian artist's work. Mr. Falkenheim hated Belgium, and, above all, Brussels. "It is a veritable *cloaque*, that city—the cesspool of Europe! What more natural than that an art like that of Rops's should blossom in it like some evil flower?" Levett, who was fond of Brussels, protested warmly, but he found it difficult to keep interested in the conversation. He felt for the moment that it would be more exciting to make some wonderful new acquaintance—to experience some strong emotion of hope, desire, or fear. . . .

They walked up and down the long room, wondering how it came about that an elderly Assyrian scholar and archæologist should have made it the passion of his life to buy pictures which represented all that was most frothy and hectic and impure in modern civilisation. Every canvas and every drawing seemed to exhale an aroma of nineteenth-century wickedness; each of them had the peculiar pungent, half-forgotten perfume of "sin."

An amusing woman called Mrs. Arbuthnot, who was know to them both as an impassioned haunter of salerooms, came up to them while they were looking at a picture of a young woman sitting half-clothed on the edge of her bed, while a man in evening dress leant against the door and watched her.

"What *fun* sin was!" she remarked chirpily, echoing Levett's own reflections. "Life will never be the same again without it. It was the greatest invention of the whole Victorian era," she sighed. "Nowadays, half the

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romance and excitement of life has disappeared. We are all so terribly hygienic, mentally and physically. I shall bid for this picture to-morrow. What is it called? 'La Noce'! I shall hang it in my own room. It is so evocative of all the poets and artists who used to come to see me five-and-twenty years ago. . . . You are a writer, Mr. Levett. You ought to write a funeral oration for Sin, with the Art of Félicien Rops as the peg to hang it on!"

Mrs. Arbuthnot moved away amid pleasant laughter, after awakening in Mr. Falkenheim the professional instinct of the dealer. He knew her to be an important buyer, and eagerly discussed with Levett the probable effect which her bidding would have on the prices obtained. . . .

Then, without a word of warning, in the midst of this commonplace conversation, the most astonishing scene enacted itself. Levett could hardly trust the evidence of his eyes and ears; what took place was too wildly improbable, too swift, too unprovoked and unheralded for belief. They had approached a group of people who were looking at one of the most important pictures in the collection. Chance brought Israel Falkenheim next to an elderly, bearded, and rather corpulent man who was leaning his weight on a gold-headed malacca cane. In turning to move away, this man accidently jogged Mr. Falkenheim's elbow, and paused to apologise. Levett saw the two men look at one another. Greatly to his surprise, he recognised in the corpulent individual Sir Carl Frensen. Then, to his amazement, he saw an extraordinary change come over the face of his old friend. It was as though Dr. Jekyll were being transformed, before his very gaze, into Mr. Hyde. Israel Falkenheim's black eyes gleamed with an evil fire. His

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lips were drawn tightly back over his teeth, his face grew livid, his whole appearance suggested some savage beast. Before Levett could collect himself sufficiently to catch his arm, his companion had struck Sir Carl in the mouth with the back of his hand. As he did so he uttered a noise resembling the cry of some wolf-like animal. . . .

The buzz of conversation in the long room stopped abruptly. There was not a sound. The crowd seemed to be frozen for an appreciable time into immobility. Every head was turned, every eye staring. . . . Levett, as soon as he recovered himself, seized Mr. Falkenheim by the arm, while Sir Carl stood where he was, his face white to the lips, looking haughtily at his enemy. Levett never forgot that picture of him: it was a fine example of dignity under difficulties.

Mr. Falkenheim did not resist his friend's restraining grasp. He seemed to collapse after his outburst, though his eyes were still blazing and his bony fingers twitching like claws. Levett led him quickly away. The crowd began once more to look hard at the pictures, and to continue its conversations in extra loud tones in order to lay emphasis on the perfection of its breeding. There was no scandal, no gesticulation, no raised voices. One young girl was heard to whisper, "Auntie, Auntie . . . *did* you see?" and for a few moments there was a thrilled murmuring in different quarters of the room—but that was all. The hubbub of conversation broke out again with renewed vigour, just as it does when someone makes a *gaffe* at the dinner-table. In a very few minutes Mr. Falkenheim was in his car being driven to Richbourne Terrace. He did not open his mouth to say one word to Levett or to the chauffeur. His lips were pressed tightly together, and as the car began to gather speed

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Levett caught a glimpse of him sitting bolt upright, motionless as an image.

While Godfrey stood on the pavement undecided, for the moment, what to do next, and still in a maze of excitement at the scene which had just been enacted, he became aware of someone emerging through the swing doors of Christie's. It was Sir Carl Frensen. He walked slowly, leaning on his cane. His face was quite impassive, and but for the fire in his red eyes and a something contemptuous in the carriage of his head he showed no traces of the ordeal through which he had just passed. His footman hurried up and opened the door of the car, holding the rug over his arm ready to wrap round his master's feet. So ended one of the most astounding little dramas which Levett had ever in his life witnessed.

Godfrey did not feel inclined just then to face Mrs. Arbuthnot and one or two other acquaintances whose presence he had noticed in the galleries, and walked back thoughtfully to his flat. He had prayed within himself for something to happen, for an emotion; and in what an unexpected fashion had his prayer been granted! As he drew into his lungs the rich air of the late September afternoon, he experienced a renewed zest for life and an increased joy in all the things which seemed to him to make life worth living—in music, in painting, in literature; in the examination of the world, with its varied beauty; and, above all, in the study of his fellow men. He felt life tingling in his veins. The mood of indifference and irritation which had invaded him earlier in the day had now disappeared, and anyone who had remarked his squared shoulders and quick step would have put him down as a man with a purpose. He had no "purpose," but he lived for the emotions of the mind, and his vivid

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delight in living preserved him from the dangers of aimlessness. Each discovery that he made about the mysterious secrets of human nature acted on him as a tonic. The fact that one old gentleman in a white felt top hat and elastic-sided boots could suddenly strike another old gentleman on the mouth, before the eyes of half the cats in London, seemed to him to lend existence a new interest and value. In every face that he passed he saw more possibilities than before; the great drama of humanity seemed to electrify the very air as he walked back to his home through the crowded central streets.

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CHAPTER XXVI

As Levett drove along Oxford Street towards Rachel's house on the Tuesday following the scene at Christie's, the newsboys were running up and down with brown and yellow placards. The brown placard bore the legend: "DEATH OF FAMOUS FINANCIER," while the yellow, more explicit, announced: "DEATH OF SIR CARL FRENSEN." Levett stopped the cab to buy one of the papers, and read that, after an illness lasting only five days, Sir Carl Frensen had died at one o'clock that afternoon at his house in Belgrave Square. The actual cause of death was said to be meningitis. There followed a lengthy biography of the dead financier, which related, in bald journalese, the main outlines of one of the most romantic careers of modern times. Levett took the paper in with him to Rachel's drawing-room, feeling sure that she would be interested.

He found she had already heard the news.

"My dear Godfrey," she said, "what do you think Eva Firbank has just told me? She says Sir Carl Frensen was practically murdered by Israel Falkenheim. Apparently Mr. Falkenheim horsewhipped him in the middle of Belgrave Square, and the old man promptly went home and took to his bed. . . . Hylda Rudin gave me quite a different version, though. She said it was at a picture show in Bond Street that the scene occurred, and that there was the most frightful shindy. The old men had a kind of free fight, and had to be separated by the attendants!"

"I was the 'attendant,'" said Levett, "so I can tell

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you what *actually* happened! It was last Wednesday afternoon, at the exhibition of Professor Tyne-Fowler's pictures at Christie's. . . ." He told her the whole singular story from beginning to end. When he had finished she stared at him for a moment without speaking, fixing her liquid dark eyes on his impassive grey ones.

"I had a telegram from Margot," Levett remarked, "just before I came out this afternoon. She has asked me to dine with her to-morrow. She and Frensen, as you know of course, were great friends. She will miss him." Levett had it on the tip of his tongue to make some comment on Margot's connection with the quarrel between Mr. Falkenheim and Sir Carl; but instinct restrained him. There was something anxious and hard about Rachel nowadays; she was quite a different woman from the Rachel with whom he had been friends for years, and his loyalty to Margot made him reticent on her behalf. It was evident that Rachel no longer had the same feelings towards Margot that she had entertained only a few months before. She seemed to have lost interest in her: to have "grown out" of her affection in the same way that a man "grows out" of a hopeless love. Rachel was absorbed in her new circle of women friends who shared her particular art enthusiasms —in her Eva Firbanks and Hylda Rudins. They made a little world of their own in which both he and Margot would inevitably be made to feel that they were intruders. Godfrey, however, could not help but be interested in the new Rachel. He looked round the drawing-room, which had been so familiar to him in Mrs. Elkington's day, and noted with an interest almost approaching excitement the changes which had been made. The whole room, like its owner, had now an exotic, half-barbarous

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flavour. Petrouschka, Rachel's lovely borzoi, looked (to Levett) much more at home in it than his mistress. There had always seemed something barbaric about Petrouschka! Levett stroked the dog's back thoughtfully, then rose from the black divan on which he was sitting—it reminded him of the divan of Queen Thamar in the ballet—and examined one of the black-framed Russian pictures which hung on the cream-coloured walls. It was a landscape by Roerich: *morne,* unearthly, violent, terrible. Black thunder-clouds battled with one another in the heavens and brooded over a dead city set in an arid plain, amid rocks and desolation. The picture seemed to bring into the room a mighty wind—to be like a message from those creatures who shriek in storms that burst over the sea. To hang such a thing in a drawing-room struck Godfrey as being about as flippant as it would be to offer the Angel of Death a cup of coffee. It was astonishing to him that Rachel, who had always been so gently "refined," should suddenly have developed this enthusiasm for violent spiritual emotions. He looked at the other pictures, all of which had the same Asiatic or Byzantine flavour, combined with the fantastic occultism of the Russian religious spirit; at the black carpet, and again at Rachel. He felt a vague resentment against her—a woman—for showing signs of what he considered to be a particularly masculine form of imagination!

Levett made some admiring and commonplace comment on the room, and they discussed their friends for a few moments longer. But it was evident to his sensitive vanity that Rachel's old interest in him had gone The animating spirit of their long friendship had died; there was nothing left but its corpse. He went away as quickly as he could, and as he left the house his

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thoughts were full of Margot, full of speculations as to her relations with Carl Frensen, of excited anticipation of their meeting on the morrow. His visit to Rachel had suddenly made Margot seem doubly desirable and charming. But at thirty-five, he reflected, one doesn't, of course, make a fool of oneself. He went over once again, in his head, his views about women. . . .

The interval seemed unduly long before he found himself outside her front door in Charles Street. A maid let him in. Margot was waiting for him in the small drawing-room, and as he entered the room he had an unforgettable vision of her, with the light from a shaded electric lamp falling on her white shoulders. He had always thought those shoulders the loveliest he had ever seen. Her black frock emphasised the beautiful texture of her skin, and its whiteness as of alabaster. Levett had never seen Margot suffer from "goose-flesh," like so many anæmic modern women. Her flesh was beautifully firm—filled with red blood under the smooth velvet skin. As she stood under the light her hair looked as pale as pale straw, and her bright blue eyes seemed to swim in fire. She greeted him with a rather scared smile, like a woman who has just been through a severe shock, and, looking at her closely, he could see that she was deadly pale under her bold *maquillage*.

"I don't know what kind of dinner you will get, Godfrey," she said. "The house is not open properly yet, and most of the servants are, of course, still at Hotham. However, I thought it would be more cosy here than at a restaurant. You mustn't grumble if the food is bad. The housekeeper here used to be my mother-in-law's cook ages ago, and was rather keen to try her hand again—just for swank, of course!"

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They went down to the dining-room, and Levett marvelled how it was that the raw girl—vivid, vulgar, and strident—whom he remembered three years ago, had managed to learn so well and so quickly her *métier de femme*. How she must have worked, how she must have observed and kept her ears open! It could not have come natural to her, this unerring touch in the arrangement of a little dinner which should be intimate and charming and not too long. And how clever of her to have got up a bottle of Krug for his benefit and to make a pretty apology for it by saying she felt "run down." Any other little upstart would have given herself away by some poisonous touch of ostentation. She had every excuse for feeling run down; but she did not drink more than her one glass, to which she made a pretence every now and then of adding a "topper." Levett thought of Rochester's diatribes against matrimony—"Marriage, oh, hell and furies, name it not!"—and remembering how the famous old rake had described marriage as "a noose to catch religious woodcocks in," he began to think that husbands, if they kept their wits about them, really got more out of life than old *roués* as industrious in vice as bumble-bees.

They did not speak much at dinner-time about Carl Frensen's death, and this conscious waiting on Margot's part till they should be "alone" seemed to underline her treatment of him as an intimate, which all the other details of this impromptu and rather daring dinner emphasised. Throughout the meal Margot's mere presence, so close to him that the faint perfume of her skin was always perceptible and troubling, was an enchantment. And it flattered him that this hard beauty, who had clawed her way up so ruthlessly, who was more feared

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than beloved, should hang on everything he said and bow before his sub-acid onslaughts.

After dinner they went upstairs to Margot's own "den" for their coffee.

"I simply can't tell you what I have been through in the last two days," said Margot, as soon as they were alone. "I was wired for at Hotham, and only just got up to London in time. Poor old man, I really believe he cared for me, in his curious way. It was horrible going to the house! I thought the butler, whom I always detested, had been drinking. One seemed somehow to notice the servants: they were vaguely disorderly and out of hand. And other people were there trying to get in to see him. Solicitors, business men of all kinds —and several women. Two of the women I knew well by sight, but one was quite a common creature with rather fine red hair. They all stared at me most insolently. There wasn't any doubt about *them.* I don't know what they thought of me, and I don't really care. But, oh, that room! I shall never forget it. It was like a church—so tall!—with the blinds drawn to save his poor weak eyes, and the daylight struggling through at the sides. Nurses, doctors—ugh! It was horrible." Margot shuddered at her recollection of the death-chamber. She had hitherto had but little experience of death; it horrified and revolted her. She wanted to shut out the thought of it and the vision of it from her mind. "I had to sit by him while he lay on his back gasping, hardly able to talk. He wanted to hold my hand, poor old man, and he told me he had always cared for me more than for any of them. I suppose he meant the creatures waiting downstairs in the dining-room, and if so, it wasn't much of a compliment. And then he rambled on about Mr. Falkenheim. He kept

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saying how 'indifferent' he was. 'A very worthy man . . . his wife, as a young woman, was much too good for him. . . . I did him an injury . . .' he said, 'and we always dislike the people we injure. But I never had the energy to *hate* him. One doesn't hate one's inferiors, Margot,' he went on, 'but he is not a bad man. I can't forgive the way he behaved to you, my dear; I can't forgive him that. But I've made it up to you. Sebastian, my lawyer, will tell you how. . . . I should have liked to see you in a ballroom again before I died. The finest pair of shoulders in London.' Just like that he said it, as though he were flirting with me over the supper-table. Now what *is* goodness and badness, Godfrey?"

There were actually tears in Margot's eyes as she asked the question, and Levett could see that she was genuinely moved. "I suppose he was bad. Everyone always said he was a fairly black-hat—scandals on the Stock Exchange and all that—just what everyone always says about wealthy 'financiers.' And then, of course, there were those creatures in the dining-room. He never made any pretence about what he liked in a woman: never talked nonsense about her 'soul,' when he was really thinking of her figure or her hair. And yet the tangible part of us wasn't all that interested him. He was a connoisseur, a critic; he liked men and women and cared for what they thought about. And he was acute and kind. Even when he laughed at one, he was never cruel. I don't think he can have been so very bad, Godfrey. He wasn't a humbug; and besides, the creatures I told you of were blubbering like babies in the hall as I went out, and I was just as silly myself. . . ."

They went on talking about the dead man, but Levett did not tell her about the scene at Christie's. He knew

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that she would not forgive Israel Falkenheim: that she would not rest until she had avenged her friend, blow for blow. An unsuspected loyalty had revealed itself in Margot's character this evening. He did not quite understand the system on which this loyalty worked; he did not believe for an instant that her husband had ever succeeded in evoking it; but it was certainly there. Her heart had cast-iron defences, to pierce which perhaps some finer and harder metal was necessary. But once her heart was touched. . . .

"I believe she could be faithful and devoted to anyone whom she loved," he reflected. Hitherto he had always looked on her as impervious to any real feeling; though the streak of sensuality which he suspected her to possess might deceive a man for a while. But now he was inclined to believe himself wrong.

"Heigho, Godfrey! I've depressed you with all this. Cheer up! I shall be in London for a few days. There is to be a memorial service at some church or other on Monday, for which I must stay. Then I suppose I must go back to Hotham. I wish you were coming down for a week or two. You know, Godfrey, you have made my life unbearable ever since you recommended me to slip off to Harding Broadley's nursing home. I don't know what it is about you, but you and Rachel Elkington between you have made me thoroughly discontented. Not that I'm specially keen on changing my existence for Rachel's, by the way. I feel as though I were living in a tunnel and that the fresh air was getting gradually exhausted! I could scream sometimes! The things I have to do just because I am I—Vernon's wife—would make anyone's hair turn grey. You know it isn't my trade, Godfrey. I wasn't born to it—thank God!—and I don't like it. I'm interested in other things. I want

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to walk about and look around and make a rubber-neck at life; not go on doing the same sort of stupid thing, year after year!" She spoke with bitterness, and with a kind of intensity of discontent which Levett thought must lead to trouble—for someone.

"You know it is your fault, very largely," she went on, smiling at Levett affectionately. "You enjoy your own life so thoroughly, you make me realise how I might enjoy mine! At all events, that is one thing Carl Frensen's death has brought me. I'm independent now. I've a fortune of my own."

Godfrey glanced at her and then looked away. But after all, he thought, there was no reason why he shouldn't be frankly interested in her inheritance. The fact that money, for intelligent people who knew how to spend it, was not a thing to be sneezed at, was one of the main articles of his personal credo. He had stated it constantly. There was no reason why he should be at pains to conceal it now. Margot did not seem particularly excited about the details of her legacy. She was still so stunned by Frensen's death that her imagination had not begun to work to enable her to visualise the inheritance which had come to her. "He told me he had given me £250,000," she said in answer to Godfrey's inquiries, "and his villa at Cap Martin, and his flat in Paris in the Avenue Hoche, and Courbet's portrait of him as a young man. He said he wanted me to have that portrait, so that I should know what he looked like forty years ago! That was almost the last thing he said before he became unconscious, and it made him laugh. That was the last I saw of him—laughing."

"Well, my dear," said Levett, "you certainly ought now to be able to fashion your existence according to your inclinations: with ten or twelve thousand a

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year of your own and two desirable residences. I envy you!"

She looked at him wonderingly, and her white arm slid along the edge of the sofa, behind him. If he leaned back he would touch it. They were silent for some minutes. It occurred to Levett that, to be true to his principles, he ought to say good-bye now to Margot, to leave her. But for the moment he could not stir. Something in her eyes seemed to hold him.

"What is money to a women who is lonely, Godfrey? You think that is a strange thing for me of all people to say. But I mean it." She paused for a while, and when she began to speak again he felt the cold chill of disappointment that comes with the realisation that an opportunity has been missed. "I don't in the least know how Vernon will take this legacy," she went on. "He is so extraordinary! One never can count on him He may be furious and say I mustn't accept it. I am going to write and tell him about it, and give it a few days to sink in, before I go back to Hotham. I expect he will get used to it in time. Well, he will have to, poor dear," she added, laughing.

Levett stared for a moment at his small, finely made ankles that looked so well in black silk socks, and then rose to his feet with a certain conscious grace of movement.

"I don't envy you the ordeal, my dear Margot," he said with a smile, as he prepared to take his leave of her; "but only fools despise riches. Poor people often say they don't care about money. But we know what that means! Even religious people, monks and so on, only appear to despise ordinary wealth because they happen to prefer a kind of esoteric riches. As one isn't in a convent, I believe in being just about as rich in

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this world's goods as it is possible to be. I congratulate you, *chère amie*. But I admit the situation has its difficult side!"

He looked at himself in the glass as he straightened his tie, and Margot, standing behind him, stared into the reflection of his grey eyes. What mysterious eyes they were! Were they wicked or only wise? The picture he made in the glass with his ivory-white skin, dark hair so carefully "plastered down," well-cut dinner jacket, gleaming shirt front, and broad black tie suggested, in the artfully-shaded glow, some polite devil. Levett always made her feel like a Sunday-school miss; while Vernon always made her feel like a fiend, all claws. She wondered why this was. Already she knew that, devil or not, Levett might one day acquire the power to frighten and hurt her and to make her obey him. And she longed with her whole heart to be frightened and hurt, and to be made to obey. . . .

Margot accompanied her guest down to the hall.

"I may come and call on you one afternoon before I go down to Hotham," she said. "I will send a telephone message to warn you if I do. Otherwise I suppose I shall see nothing of you till we come up again? Vernon insists on slaughtering the wretched pheasants. We have another agonising shooting party coming down for the week after next. I wish you were coming, too, to counteract them!"

They shook hands decorously, and as he opened the door to let himself out he had a quick glimpse of her standing in the white light of the electric lamp which lit the hall. There was something radiant in her face, and under its artificial freshness a glow of youth seemed to vivify it. And in her brilliant blue eyes he noticed for the first time a look of tenderness.

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CHAPTER XXVII

ALTHOUGH Vernon had ample time before her return to Hotham in which to answer his wife's letter announcing her legacy from Sir Carl Frensen, he did not do so. This fact awoke in Margot a certain uneasiness. She did not like Vernon's silences; they almost invariably indicated that he was "thinking things." The idea that Vernon should be in a position to "think things" about her filled her with irritation. She knew she was being unfair to him; but he was the kind of man to whom it was impossible for a woman to be other than unfair. Life with him had resolved itself into a conflict of egoisms, in which victory was an essential of peace. She did not dare give way an inch.

As the train hurried her through the pensive autumn landscape, through woods where the yellowing leaves still hung forlornly on the trees, past orchards where the red apples hung like emblems of fecundity—Nature's ultimate aim—Margot found herself invaded by an enervating melancholy. She was tired. She did not want to do any more fighting, any more struggling. She had no desire to hurt Vernon; she bore him no ill-will; but they were grotesquely unsuited to one another. Why had he been such a fool as to marry her, she wondered? That little idiot, Ida Mertoun, with her chatter about books and her little verses which she contributed to the magazines, would have suited him excellently. Each was as empty and as pretentious as the other, and each had the same instincts and ambitions. Ida would have been delighted to have dropped her poetising and have settled down to the business of being Lady Stokes, the

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business for which she was fitted so admirably. They would have stuck together. After four or five years Ida would have provided the two necessary children. Then perhaps a lover or two would have helped to keep her amused until the children became "interesting." Contentment! Ida would have been so contented. She saw the whole of Ida's life stretched out in her mind's eye: her life as Vernon's wife. What a fool Vernon had been not to see what was best for himself. And he would have enjoyed being Lord Mertoun's son-in-law, she reflected: she knew him so well! They would have got on just smoothly enough and quarrelled just often enough to make their joint lives tolerable; while the dead-weight of their two families, and their inherited sense of responsibility, would have kept them together. But Vernon had been foolish enough to marry her, and as she thought of his adoration of her beauty, an adoration so constantly displayed, she softened towards him. His passion for her had lasted astonishingly. She had given him moments perhaps of greater happiness than he would ever have known with Ida. But instinctively she knew within herself, and shuddered at the thought of it, how she was still to make him suffer. . . . Fool, fool, that he was! He ought to have known better than to marry a wild, violent, dissatisfied creature like herself. Why should she pity him? No one pitied fools nowadays; all that sort of thing went out for good with Dobbin and Amelia!

The landscape became increasingly familiar; the train drew nearer and nearer to the station where the car would be waiting to drive her over the moor to Hotham. The Ashbury's house, to be discerned at the end of a long avenue of elms, flashed by. And now on the white

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high road which ran parallel with the railway line she could see the Vicar of Woollscombe, driving his old mare in his high yellow dog-cart. He was going to have afternoon tea with Miss Thorpe, up at "The Spinney." Margot remembered that it was the local gossip that Miss Thorpe meant to catch him, "and what a good thing it would be for his two little girls to have someone to look after them." The vicar's first wife had been a daughter of George Brandon, a drunken reprobate who lived in the next village to Hotham, but had the felicity of belonging, in Vernon's eyes, to the "known." A scornful interior chuckle ran through Margot at the recollection of Vernon's description of Mr. Brandon. People had more sense on those points, even in Montreal. There a waster was a waster; and if he was "known," so much the worse for him.

As the train slowed down, cottages, farms, large and small houses went by the window, the inhabitants of which were all known to her. There was the grey stucco villa of the veterinary surgeon with the wife who drank, who had been called in when Teddy, her grey pom, had his fits. The bigger house farther on, with the Virginia creeper all over it, was Doctor Parkinson's. Margot had always thought kindly of the Parkinsons since the vicar's wife, when calling at Hotham, had confided to her how terribly "not quite" poor Mrs. Parkinson was! The church appeared; then the vicarage; then the "White Hart"; then the horrid little station. Now for it! Margot resumed her heaviest manner as Tom, the new footman, opened the door of the car for her and settled the rugs over her knees before returning to his place by the chauffeur's side. . . .

Margot was conscious of a certain stillness and empti-

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ness about Hotham on her arrival. Vernon was out talking to the game-keepers, Ernestine was subdued—depressing as a wet blanket. Vernon came in at tea-time and greeted her with a certain forced naturalness which boded ill. It was his idea of being subtle to become wooden whenever anything went on inside his brain. He was affectionate to Margot, laughed and talked in an ordinary voice, but there was a careful avoidance of mentioning Carl Frensen, which made it obvious to her that his mind was entirely taken up with considerations of this one subject. The semi-publicity of the drawing-room, however, prevented him from broaching it at tea-time. Someone might have come in; and it would have horrified Vernon to have allowed himself to be surprised in the middle of a "scene." In his view, only the middle and lower classes ever indulged in "words." At dinner he casually remarked that his grandparents were motoring over from Clevedon the next day, and would arrive in time for luncheon. He did not see Margot bite her lips as he made this announcement, or notice the suppressed passion which suddenly blazed up in her blue eyes. He was not looking at her, but was hunting about the room for his cigarette-box.

"So he has told them!" Margot thought. "The stupid coward! I won't give way a single inch for all the Cornewalls or Stokeses in the world!"

"I expect mother will come too," Vernon added, when he had found his cigarette-box. He opened the lid as he spoke and offered one to his wife. "She is staying with them now at Clevedon." So a family council was to sit in judgment on her, Margot thought. Very well. They would find her ready for them!

"What do they want to come and see us again so soon for, I wonder?" she said aloud. "It is barely a fortnight

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since they left, and your mother and grandmother can't want to shoot pheasants!"

Vernon did not reply.

The evening passed slowly. It was very rare for them to find themselves alone in the house, without visitors to mitigate their constant companionship. Usually this would have filled Vernon with pleasure, but to-night he was uncomfortable, conscious, perhaps, of his wife's cold and concentrated fury, and taken aback by it. Margot knew quite well what he was waiting for. He would come into her bedroom to say good-night, and they would have a heart-to-heart talk. She would weep on his pyjamas and be kissed and agree to give up her legacy after protesting the purity of her relations with Frensen! Would she, by God! Her eyes glittered, at the prospect, in a way which Vernon noticed and which struck him as being vaguely ominous. If he hadn't flown to his family for moral support, she would have felt compunctions, and perhaps have given way to him, or at least have compromised and "been nice." But now her heart was like a flint. She would not yield one inch for the whole lot of them, and she would make him suffer for his mean cowardice.

Vernon kept up an intermittent flow of small talk while Margot sat with a novel in her lap, the illustrated papers spread out on the sofa round her, and an open cigarette-case by her side.

The new garage would be finished next week. It would be a relief, wouldn't it, to get the workmen away from the place! Then there was the question of the next party and where they were to be put. (The party for the First had only recently broken up.)

Patcham and Joyce wouldn't object to being doubled up in the long room. Captain Armytage would have

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Uncle George's room, Tommy Maunsell could have the blue room, and Hellyar the room over the library. At ten, when the butler was due to take the spirit-tray into his den, Vernon got up and left his wife. He was obviously ill at ease. His lips twitched under his moustache, and, as Margot put it to herself, "he kept feeling about with his hands for his dignity, to make sure it was there." She foresaw that he would be very nervous, before the evening was over, about his dignity. And while she observed, sardonically, his weaknesses, her anger blinded her to the misery in his eyes, the agonised dumb wretchedness of him. He was like some beautiful stag firmly entangled in a snare and suffering, suffering. . . .

While Vernon was fortifying himself in his "study" with a whisky-and-soda and trying to fix his attention on "Lord Ormont and his Aminta," Margot went up to her room. As she walked slowly up the broad staircase of black oak that was one of the glories of Hotham, she felt a fierce dislike of the house. It was not her house; it was Vernon's. She had a longing to live in a house of her own, and her heart leapt within her when she reflected that this was now possible. She actually possessed a house of her own, and a flat in Paris, near the Parc Monceau. She remembered the Parc Monceau so well, with its rows of nurses and perambulators, packed tight as the geraniums in a suburban front garden; its monuments to Chopin and Maupassant; its oval lake flanked by the semi-circular colonnade; its air of primness and artificiality. And she remembered the quiet streets all round the little park: the Avenue Van Dyke, the Rue Murillo, the Avenue Ruysdael, and the broader Avenue Hoche. So she had a flat close to the Parc Monceau, in that sumptuous quarter of her adored Paris!

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Of course, she would have to go over there very soon to take possession. Sir Silas Cornewall, Knight (of Charles I.'s reign), stared at her insolently from his frame as she leant over the oak baluster to look down into the hall. He seemed to say to her, "What are *you* doing here! Your home is in Paris, in the Parc Monceau district. You have a villa at Cap Martin. You are an alien. Go away!"

"I feel tired to-night, Ernestine. I have had a very worrying time in London," Margot remarked to her maid when she reached her bedroom.

"Milady looks very pale," Ernestine replied. "The country air will do her good. But as for me, the country kills me, Milady. *C'est assommant, à la fin, de rester à la campagne.*"

"How would you like to come with me to Paris, Ernestine?"

"Ah, Milady is joking!"

"Not at all. I have a flat there now and a villa at Cap Martin. You would enjoy visiting them with me!" Ernestine's look of rapture made Margot chuckle. At least her legacy would make one fellow-creature happy.

When she had dismissed her maid, Margot turned off the switch of her reading-lamp and waited. In a little while she could hear Vernon moving about in the next room. She lay in her bed with closed eyes, her body taut, expectant, nerves strung like bow-strings, ready to vibrate to the smallest touch. At last there came the knock at the door—decisive and sharp, carefully not timid—and Vernon came towards her in the darkness.

"Look here, Margot," he said, speaking quickly, some of his words losing themselves in his moustache, "this Frensen business, you may as well know, has got to be

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cleared up between us. It is driving me off my head. I didn't say anything to you before or write to you. I couldn't. But there is no use putting it off. We have got to have it out sooner or later."

Margot gave an ostentatious yawn. "Get off my leg, for Heaven's sake!" she snapped. "You are simply breaking it. You weigh about a ton. I am tired out. . . . I have been run to death all the week, in London, but, of course, you never have the slightest consideration for anyone but yourself. . . ."

They were still in darkness, and could not see one another. Vernon had left the light on in his bedroom, and a faint yellow glow coming through the top and bottom of the communicating door was the only glimmer of illumination in the heavily curtained room. But Vernon did not want just then to see his wife's face. He had pulled himself together for a great effort. His vanity—the strongest thing in his nature—had received an agonising blow, and as the fumes of the whisky which he had drunk rose to his head, he could think of nothing but the vile thing which had happened. He felt inclined to weep with sorrow for himself, with sympathy for his own undeserved unhappiness.

"You evidently don't realise how serious this matter is," he said fiercely. "I suppose it is natural enough that you shouldn't."

"Realise what?"

"How the world will regard this legacy. You cannot possibly accept it, Margot. Believe me. . . ."

Margot sat bolt upright in her bed and glared at him through the impenetrable gloom.

"If that is all you have to say, go out of my room at once," she hissed. "You must be mad." She laughed

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at him scornfully, a laugh of power, a laugh with no mercy in it.

"If you have to learn the truth from other people instead of from me, you won't like it. I've only come to save you, if I can, from your own folly. You have made it quite clear that you don't care a rap about me, and that you care still less about the family you have married into. You only care about this miserable sum of money. God help you."

"You bet," said Margot, "God will help me right enough. He is grateful to me for the trouble I save Him. You are quite right about my not caring a fig about the family. Why should I? Who are they? Everyone knows your grandfather started life as a coal-heaver. At least, the Cartiers . . ."

It was Vernon's turn to laugh. He went off into peals of hysterical, high-pitched laughter, which goaded Margot to fury.

"Don't, for heaven's sake, turn on any more about the family," she went on. "I don't wonder that even you laugh at yourself. If you've got anything to say, say it, but don't drag in the family. Fat lot I care about them."

Vernon's laughter stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

"I can tell you this," he said, "that unless you renounce this legacy from Carl Frensen, they will never have anything more to do with you. . . . You were compromised with him sufficiently before I married you. . . ."

"I was *what,* Vernon?" Margot asked quietly.

"Compromised; and you know it. This legacy confirms all that your worst enemies ever said about you."

Margot's face flushed in the darkness. "So you have been saving this up all the years of our married life—this

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vitriol—ready to squirt at me whenever you thought the moment had come! Thanks, Vernon. We know where we are, at all events." Vernon was choking now with emotion. He got up from the bed and stumbled about the room, trying to recover the control of his voice.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, "what have I done?"

"Made an ass of yourself," Margot snapped. "No need to tell God about it. He knows already."

He rushed at her shouting: "Be quiet, will you!" grasping the warm flesh of her upper arm, through her silken night-clothes. In an instant he would have struck her, but the concentrated fury of her quiet voice made him recover himself.

"If you want the servants to witness your disgusting temper, you need not shout. I have my hand on the bell. I can easily ring for Ernestine. . . ."

Her arms smarted under the grip of his frenzied hands. She knew how easily her flesh bruised. In a day or two, great green and purple marks would become visible. She would get a doctor, Ernestine, all sorts of people to take note of them. Everyone would bear witness to his brutality.

After his outburst, to Margot's amazement, Vernon began to cry quietly. She could not see his tears in the darkness, but she knew instinctively that they were falling down his cheeks. His shoulders were heaving.

"Margot," he said, "it can't have come to this so soon. All I want is for you to tell me frankly what there was between you and Frensen . . . and, in any case, to give up this money. You have all you need under your marriage settlement. We have plenty between us. Surely you must see that, for everyone's sake, for the sake of our children, if we have any, you can't accept Frensen's money. It would always make some-

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thing between us. It would poison the rest of our lives. Our children when they grew up would hear rumours. You don't need this extra money. It would be a perpetual open disgrace to both of us if you accepted it. You must not do so, believe me. You know mother is no fool in these matters, nor grandfather either. They will both tell you just what I have said about it, to-morrow."

Margot snorted: "What *is* the good of wasting your breath! If you honestly think I shall give up a legacy like Carl Frensen's just because your horrid family choose to imagine all sorts of filth about me, you must be mad. I shall do nothing of the sort. I am a free agent. I shall tell you nothing about 'what there was between me and Frensen.' I don't care a fig what you think; think what you like. I've told you to go once. Why don't you do so?"

"If I go now, I warn you, I may never come back."

"Well, never come back then! *I* never want to see you, after this."

"Margot . . ."

"Oh, shut up, can't you?" shouted Margot. "Don't turn on the sentimental, 'Heartsease Library' tap! I can bear anything but that. . . ."

"Very well," said Vernon quietly. He shrugged his shoulders in the darkness and walked with exaggerated slowness across to the door leading to his room. For an instant, when the door opened, Margot caught a glimpse of him framed in the sudden brightness. His handsome face was all disordered and working; his moustache was ragged, his hair tousled and standing up absurdly. She knew then that she had struck him to the heart; that even if they patched up a truce, things could never be the same again. The breach was irreparable; she had wounded and defiled his sacred vanity, spat upon all

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that was most holy to him. It would be a point of honour with him not to forgive her.

"But it isn't in writing: and the servants could not have made out anything," she reflected, "at least, nothing to swear to, even if they were listening at the keyhole. I can make it all right if necessary, and, any way, I wouldn't have been beastly to him if he hadn't run squealing to the family!" She lay awake for some time longer, and from occasional movements in the next room she gathered that Vernon also was awake. Finally she fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamed horrible dreams.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

MARGOT could not but admire Vernon's appearance the next morning. He "played up" magnificently. In several small ways he contrived to accentuate the protective courtesy which came so easy to him when he chose to display it. He was more conversational than usual at breakfast, and Margot came nearer to respecting him than she remembered to have done before. She felt that, after all, he "*was* such a gentleman." The greeting with her mother-in-law and the grandparents who motored over together from Clevedon, and arrived at Hotham just before luncheon, was commonplace in the extreme. Margot was impressed by her relatives' "refinement," by their arrogant reserve and hard social surface. Only by noting infinitesimal shades of manner could she discover any difference in their treatment of her, any indication of the spectre in the background. After luncheon, when Margot sat with the other women in the drawing-room waiting for Vernon to join them with his grandfather, she felt she could bear the "fine reserves" no longer.

"Well, grandmamma," she said, "I suppose Vernon has told you all about my legacy, and you have turned up to scold me about it."

"Not scold you, Margot," interposed Lady Stokes, "you mustn't say that. But we naturally regard the whole matter as serious. It is more serious for you, dear, than for us."

"What does grandmamma think of it?" Margot asked, wishing to give her mother-in-law a lesson in manners. Mrs. Cornewall lifted a fat little hand from her lap and

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let it fall again. She had aged very much during the last few years, and found it difficult to be serious about anything, except in flashes. She was almost perpetually amused, and her round grey eyes seemed to radiate good humour and an enjoyment of the joke. She sat in her gala costume of crimson satin trimmed with beetle-wing embroidery, with her famous "front" of golden-brown hair, holding her walking-stick and looking down contentedly at her tiny feet.

"My dear, you mustn't ask me," she said, smiling at Margot. "I always did like Cap Martin, and I remember Sir Carl's villa so well. What a pity he didn't manage it all through his solicitor quite quietly and tactfully. Then we should all have been pleased. . . ."

"I don't know about that, mother," said Lady Stokes with a faint smile, "but I admit it would have made a difference. You see there is such a thing as family honour, Margot," she continued, turning to her daughter-in-law.

"Why, of course!" said Margot dutifully. "You must not think that I forget that for an instant. But I can't see why this legacy from my old friend should injure it!"

"Ah—that is the point!"

"What is the point?" roared the General, who came into the room at that moment with Vernon.

"We were just discussing my legacy from Carl Frensen," said Margot boldly.

"Nothing to discuss, my dear," roared the ex-tamer of hill-tribes. He pulled his stubbly grey beard with his astonishingly small, fine hand, and stood looking like some shaggy old sheep-dog in the middle of the room. "The only thing to do with money like that is to refuse to touch it. That is all! No nonsense, no palaver.

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That is the only way! No need for any silly talk, as I have just been telling Vernon. . . . Now then, Margot where is that new garage that I'm to see! Get it over quickly. Show me the crimes that Vernon has been committing against our old home."

Margot jumped to her feet and gave the General her arm, after first kissing him on the forehead. "You are quite right, grandpapa," she said, laughing. "There is a great deal too much palaver about a very simple matter. Let us go and look at the monstrosity!"

As she walked off with him, leaving Vernon and his mother nonplussed and the grandmother, as usual, overcome with laughter, Margot visualised the old man refusing gorgeous bribes offered by native princes in jewelled turbans. He had spent fifty years of his life being arrogantly beyond the temptation of bribes; no wonder, poor old darling, the refusal of wealth had become with him an *idée fixe*. It was his private "swank" —the point of complacency which made his old age happy —to reflect on all the diamonds, the rubies, and the solid gold which might have been his if he had not been incorruptible. Margot loved him for it, and was sorry that it would be necessary to hurt him. They examined together the red brick erection of Vernon's "art" architect, and gazed in joint disgust at its little "Queen Anne style" turret surmounted by its gilded "art" weathervane!

"My dear," said the old man, "*entre nous,* I think it is dreadful! Let us escape from it quickly and go down to the lake."

They walked on through the park, looking at the red-brown, the gold, and burnished copper of the autumn foliage, while the General told Margot interminable stories of his boyhood at Hotham, which gave her a vivid

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picture of country life more than sixty years ago. His reminiscences interested her, but they made her realise once again how essentially she was a stranger at Hotham. The place, naturally, had quite a different meaning for this old man than it had for her, while to Vernon it was as sacred as a shrine. They were all of them at home here; she was not, nor did she wish to be. . . . During the rest of their walk, Margot and her companion, who enjoyed each other's company and instinctively hated "unpleasant" subjects, avoided any further discussion of the points at issue.

At tea-time the conversation also was normal; the electricity in the air did not show itself in any violent flashes. Margot thought her mother-in-law looked very tired and miserable. She was miserable, Margot guessed, because of her son's unhappiness; she had never realised before the depths of her mother-in-law's devotion to Vernon. She looked almost like a woman in acute physical pain, and at the back of her dark eyes lurked the reflection of her agony.

"My dear Margot," she said quietly in the hall, just before the car came round that was to carry them all away, "I don't want you to think that any of us blame you. We only want you both to be happy. It is so easy for married people to make themselves wretched, to embitter their lives. And no amount of wealth can soften the misery of misunderstandings. . . ."

"Good-bye," said Margot, kissing her mother-in-law. "Don't you worry. Vernon will get over it all right!" Lady Stokes sank back against the cushions of the car as if she had been hit. If she could have drawn a revolver at that moment and shot Margot dead she would have done so with exultant satisfaction. . . .

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Dinner that evening was an ordeal which tried even Margot's nerves. Vernon's line, which he did to perfection, was an easy affability. Never again would he let her see into his heart; he would at all costs deprive her of the satisfaction of watching how she made him wince. A hatred of her grew up in him, side by side with his passion for her, which seemed to him now like some vile madness which he had been too weak-minded to stamp out. She was mean, treacherous, unfaithful. All these years she had deceived him, had carried on an intrigue with a disgusting old man. She had done this in spite of all he had done for her, of all the benefits he had conferred on her, and of the way he had honoured her—despite the opposition of his family and friends—by making her his wife. Once he let himself believe in her guiltiness as regards Frensen; all the other insinuations and hints contained in the letter which he had taken from his father's writing-table came flocking back into his mind. There was nothing now which he would not believe of her. As for her past, in Canada, who could tell what crimes she might not have committed? The letter had said she was the daughter of a small grocer and had a very "lively reputation" before she had imposed upon poor Mr. Falkenheim. It was no good; you couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Vernon asked his wife what "grandpapa's opinion was about the garage" while the butler moved round the table with dishes, thinking all the while these thoughts. Her loveliness maddened him almost as much as her serenity. "Bad blood," he said to himself, "bad blood. It always shows sooner or later. They were all quite right; father was quite right. She would have been well enough as a mistress. . . ." He watched his wife helping herself from the silver dish the butler carried

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with a peculiar daintiness of gesture that was all her own. Her china-blue eyes had never looked more limpid; the pale gold of her hair had never seemed more fairy-like. She was almost unnaturally radiant. He found himself thinking how white her shoulders would be, and recalling the loveliness of her bosom. But why was she wearing a high-necked frock this evening? Had he hurt her the night before when he had lost his temper? His thoughts went backwards, forwards, behind his mask of small talk; his growing hatred had to battle with a rising flood of passion, but sometimes his passion seemed to inflame his hatred, and then he was frightened of himself to think what he might do. But he would control himself; he would be easy about it; the scene should be managed perfectly. With a cigarette in his mouth, and in a gently modulated voice, he would deliver his ultimatum. On the morrow, if it were not accepted, he would be gone. . . . Never would she be able to say of him that he had not been generous, high-minded. He blushed when he found himself repeating the phrase *noblesse oblige;* but, after all, that was what it would amount to. He would have to spend an uncomfortable night in an hotel, in the same bedroom as some poor creature hired for the purpose—then in the process of time he would be free. Thank God, there were no children to complicate matters. . . . He thought of the great sorrow that had come over his fair young life: but if his brown hair went a little grey over the ears, he would still be "interesting." He finished his port wine, lighted a cigarette, and sat watching the chair which his wife had just vacated. How admirably normal their conversation during dinner had been. He had to confess that Margot had played up, too. She was adaptable, certainly; it was

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only when you scratched the surface that the common blood spurted out at you . . .

He went into the drawing-room where his wife was sitting, his head well carried. He had a beautifully shaped head—pure Cornewall, he used to say—and his years in the army had given him a certain magnificence of deportment of which he could avail himself at will. He settled himself in a chair opposite his wife, and drew in a mouthful of smoke from his cigarette. "Well, Margot?" he said quietly.

"Well?" asked Margot, burlesquing his careful suavity.

"We have to decide what we are going to do, and the sooner the better. You have heard whatever my grandfather and my mother had to say. Won't you realise that I meant it when I told you you must give up this legacy?"

"Oh, yes, I realise it," said Margot, "and I consider the suggestion an insult! Margot gave her hard laugh. Vernon flushed and rose to his feet. He paused for an impressive moment.

"You realise, of course, that we cannot go on living together any longer after this? . . . I understand then, once and for all, that you will not clear up this Frensen business and renounce this legacy?"

"I will not."

"Very well. To-morrow I shall go away from Hotham. You had better put off all our guests for next Monday week. I shall not come back. If you want your freedom you can sue me for restitution, and at some hotel or another you will be able to make the usual inquiries. Our marriage has been a ghastly failure. But I dare say the fault was mine as much as yours," he added, with

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insincere magnanimity. "In any case, I don't want you to suffer. Within a year you will be able to marry someone else. Good-bye." He threw his cigarette into the fire and looked at her. Her face was motionless, not a muscle twitched.

"Good-bye, Vernon," she said quietly. "You shall have your freedom as quickly as the lawyers can arrange things. I should try Ida Mertoun next if I were you. She'll fit the situation splendidly, and you will be able to read the whole of Meredith's novels to each other and patronise the entire county! Well, good-bye and good luck!"

She smiled at him lightly as he turned on his heel and went out. But what a good looking fellow he was, and how his fingers had gripped her shoulder the night before! Those marks would come in useful, by the way. It would be necessary to prove cruelty. She would have to show them to Ernestine and to a doctor. She must suffer from "shock" to-morrow as a result of poor old Vernon's "brutality"!

Well, it was a pity he was such a fool. Looking back on her life with him, as she already began to do, she realised that she had never liked him so much as in the moment when he had lost his temper with her and nearly struck her. . . . Perhaps if he had done so quite, things might have been different. How could she tell? Her nature had its secrets, even from herself. But he had not struck her; his "fine reserves," as usual, had prevented him. Yes, that had always been the trouble with Vernon—his "consciousness." During all the time she had known him she could only recall one spontaneous action on his part—when he had gripped her shoulders. And even that one had been broken off short.

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CHAPTER XXIX

WHATEVER Margot may have thought in the bottom of her heart was likely to be the upshot of her quarrel with Vernon, all doubts were set at rest as soon as she woke on the following morning. "Sir Vernon caught the early train," Ernestine remarked in reply to Margot's question as to whether her husband had started yet. "Andrews gave me this letter for you, Milady," Ernestine went on, handing her mistress an envelope addressed in Vernon's handwriting. "Sir Vernon left instruction that it was to be given you as soon as you were awake. Andrews went up to London with Sir Vernon. They started packing at six o'clock, Milady."

Margot made some reply in a matter-of-fact voice that should make it appear that she knew all about her husband's movements, while she opened his letter. Evidently Vernon had been discreet; Ernestine had no suspicion that there was "anything wrong." Vernon's letter was unexpectedly businesslike; there was not a word in it of sentiment or of regret. He made suggestions as to what should be written to their invited guests. The men he would communicate with himself; but it was important that her letters to the women who had been asked should contain excuses which tallied with his. Then there followed money arrangements, which had been carefully thought out with a view to her convenience and comfort, and some final advice as to what she should write to the various members of the family. The letter was, in truth, a model of magnanimity. Margot had to take a hard pull at herself to avoid giving way to depression after reading it. Vernon was not,

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after all, such a contemptible object as she had been apt to think. He was long-suffering; but when he acted, he acted with decision and promptitude, and his actions were irrevocable. There could be no going back now, no compromise or discussion. The discussions were all over. She realised that her husband was not merely conceited, he was proud as well, and this pride she respected. With the reaction after the nervous excitements of the last few weeks culminating in this final parting, there came a revulsion of feeling which she could not stem. She cursed her feminine weakness, but she could not help it. All the good points about Vernon came flocking into her thoughts. She had belonged first to him; he, after all, was the only man who had ever possessed her. Even if he were pompous and vain, he was also beautiful and brave, every inch a man. She had never seen him show fear. She recalled one or two occasions when they had been in danger. How proud of him she had always been in a crisis! He was her ideal of the courageous soldier. If there were ever a war, she thought, Vernon would have his chance. Both he and all the men of his type were survivals from some less complicated, more picturesque age. They didn't belong to "to-day" in the least: and she did. That was the secret of the incompatibility of Vernon's temperament and her own. But now that he was gone, an unsuspected streak of sentimentality in her nature made her yearn for him. She knew that this was only a momentary weakness, that she would recover in a little while, that her clear brain had not misled her. But as she roamed about the empty house, with the tension of her nerves relaxed, the desire to hide herself and weep overcame her. She felt friendless and despondent. There seemed to be no place in all the world where she *belonged*. She had always

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felt a stranger at Hotham. It was her own fault: she had never taken the trouble to identify herself completely with the place and its inhabitants. As things had fallen out, this was, perhaps, just as well. But would she find it different when she came to live in the homes she had inherited? Would she not always be restless, a wanderer on the face of the earth, unsatisfied until the day of her death? No, surely her luck would not desert her. Godfrey would always be near at hand. She could not dwell on the idea of future happiness without including Godfrey in the picture. Perhaps it was his *positiveness* that was so comforting. He was never negative like Vernon. There were always things he wanted her to do, and she dimly realised that life with him, if she married him, might resolve itself into a continuous indulgence in the spiritual sensuality of obedience. What a comfort it would be—for a time, at all events—to be ordered about, to be told when to rise and when to rest, when to eat and when to leave off! She longed to be set free for a while from the bondage of her own caprices. Her marriage with Vernon had been hopeless from the beginning. They had never had a chance together. He had not understood her at all, and until now she had hardly understood herself. . . .

The hours which followed Vernon's departure were the longest she could remember since the day she had spent at the St. Pancras Hotel after her ignominious ejection from Richbourne Terrace. She had never anticipated for a moment that her parting from Vernon—in spite of the fact that she certainly did not love him—would prove so upsetting. It is one thing, she discovered, to plan a line of action in one's brain, another thing to put it successfully into execution and to be faced with the result.

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When Ernestine came in to help her dress for dinner, she found her mistress in tears, and with the ready tact of the Frenchwoman slid on to her knees by Margot's side and grasped her hand, pouring out respectful endearments in her native tongue. This display of affection on the part of her maid increased Margot's emotionalism to a point when she began to enjoy it. Her dramatic sense, inherited from the mother she had never known, was aroused. She could see herself sitting before her dressing-table in her great bedroom, with bent gold head and heaving shoulders, her sympathetic handmaiden in a heap on the floor by her side. The picture would be called "The Young Wife," and crowds would gape at it on the walls of the Academy and "wonder what had happened"! Some time or another Ernestine would have to be told what had happened in order that she might corroborate the distressing story in court, and it seemed to Margot that it might as well be now as later. So amid her tears she contrived to take Ernestine into her confidence as to the cause of her grief. She let her maid help her undress, for she wanted to have a bath before dinner, and this gave her the opportunity she needed of showing Ernestine the marks of Vernon's brutality. Rather to Margot's annoyance, Ernestine seemed to regard these marks with composure, almost, indeed, with a smile. This would not do at all, so she contrived to be seized with a fresh paroxysm of weeping, and threw herself sobbing on to her bed, declaring that she would have no bath and no dinner, and that she only wanted to die, she was so miserable.

"Milady must see the doctor," said Ernestine, all solicitude now and anxiety, and alive at last to the necessities of the situation. Margot continued to weep silently. The light in her room was carefully shaded by

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Ernestine, and a handkerchief soaked in *eau de Cologne* was applied by the maid to her fevered forehead, while the doctor was being sent for. Margot was quite able to handle Doctor Morison, though the proceedings were beginning rather to bore her. He was a young doctor, new to the neighbourhood, and was much moved by the greenish bruises on the soft white flesh of Margot's shoulders. Sympathy positively exuded from him. He prescribed for nervous collapse, but in parting was inspired to urge that half a bottle of champagne often had a wonderfully tonic effect on the system. In reply to Margot's inquiry, he also agreed that a change of air would be the best thing possible for her as soon as she felt strong enough to move!

By the next morning Margot felt strong enough for anything, and she came to the conclusion that she could not stay on at Hotham a single hour longer than was necessary. She wanted excitement, something to take her out of herself, to make her forget. She would have liked to rush up to London, to drive straight to Levett's flat, and tell him all about what had happened; but a feeling of shyness restrained her even from writing to him. Later on it would be different, when she was free.

She thought next of Vivie Nugent. But on reflection she decided that she was afraid of Vivie's shrewd, clever eyes, of her disconcerting intuitions. And wherever Vivie was, there was always an accompaniment of noise—a dainty, exciting noise—but still noise. And she did not feel that just then her nerves would stand it, nor the strain of watching her words in order to avoid giving herself away. The only other refuge she could think of was Kingsworth. If she could put in a week or two with Mary Henderson and turn her into a staunch ally, it would be an excellent move. On the other hand, Mary

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was so terribly high-minded; and she would be sure to have heard of Carl Frensen's legacy. Margot realised that there is nothing like a thoroughly good woman for putting two and two together and making eight. All the same, she had an almost superstitious feeling that Kingsworth was a good place to go to. Sometimes she thought she owed the fact that she was where she was—and not some poor little struggling derelict, sucked back into Montreal by the return of the wave—almost entirely to the Hendersons. It was their *rôle* to lend her moral support! She would have Mary telephoned to and see what she said. . . .

Mary Henderson expressed great pleasure at the prospect of receiving a visit from Margot, and invited her to go over to Kingsworth on the following day in time for luncheon, promising her the room which she had occupied when she had stayed there before her marriage. The next move being thus decided on, Margot's feeling of nervelessness and misery vanished. She was always happy when she had settled exactly what to do and had only to go straight ahead and do it. The next morning, as the miles increased which separated her from Hotham, her spirits rose. She was still young enough to enjoy putting away the past and forging ahead into the future. She lifted up the speaking-tube and told the chauffeur to hurry whenever he saw a chance, and in a little while she observed that the hand of the speedometer had moved round from thirty to forty. She lowered the window of the car, letting in a gust of damp autumnal air which chilled her through her furs, but at the same time made her heart beat faster with excitement.

It was just one o'clock when the car swung through the lodge gates at Kingsworth, and surged up the drive

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towards the portico. The ringing of the bell fixed in the little belfry over the class-rooms at the back of the house reminded Margot that it was term time, and that all the little boys and the weedy assistant-masters would be in residence. Mary came out into the portico just as she emerged from the car and kissed her affectionately, and in another moment Adam came through the green baize door which led into the boys' quarters and shook hands with her. Margot noticed that he had chalk on his fingers, and also that Mary's brown shoes were terribly "sensible." She reproached herself for noticing such details, but it was no good her pretending to have remained where she was. She felt she must be so changed from the raw girl who had come to stay in this house such a few short years ago as to be almost unrecognisable.

She became gradually conscious, after a day or two, that neither Mary nor Adam really liked her as much, now, as they had done before her marriage. She set herself to try to win back their affection. Her obvious delight at revisiting Kingsworth helped her in this. She found the house and village as charming as ever. Old John Vile was still alive, and Mrs. Holden and Rosie and the crabbed old doctor—she renewed her acquaintance with them all. She did not tell Mary immediately about Vernon's desertion, for she was afraid her friend would have heard of Frensen's legacy and might be silently condemning her. She had not yet succeeded in growing out of her wholesome awe of Mary's clear and penetrating blue eyes, and before bestowing her confidence she looked about for some way of ensuring for it a good reception. Mary's latest enthusiasm, now that the crèche was in full working order, was the "Women's Poor-Law Administration League." Her eyes gleamed with the bright fire of her enthusiasm whenever the mystic letters

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"W.P.L.A.L." were mentioned. Margot could not help connecting the new "movement" with Mary's sensible brown shoes, her disinfectants, and her fad for lukewarm baths and draughts (otherwise "fresh air"). It was all so excellent and so uncomfortable! Three years ago she might have fallen a victim and caught the enthusiasm; but marriage had at least rendered her immune from movements. She found, however, that whenever she listened to Mary's remarks about the "W.P.L.A.L." her friend's attitude of reserve vanished, and that the more interest in it she affected, the more friendly became Mary's manner towards her. She decided to take a pull at herself and go with Mrs. Henderson to a meeting at Dorchester. It was an agonising experience, but the effect on Mary of her simulated adherence to the cause was almost miraculous. It was just after her return from this meeting, in the hour before dinner, that she elected to tell Mary her story of Vernon's desertion. The appeal to Mary's kind heart met with complete success. Mrs. Henderson could think no evil of a supporter of the "W.P.L.A.L." She embraced Margot and "mothered" her with a tenderness which she could not have shown to anyone who was not a "sympathiser."

"My poor darling! It is dreadful for you. You know you can rely on us to do anything we can to help you. I feel sure he will come back; but if he doesn't, of course, you must have your freedom. If you really *must* leave us to-morrow, Adam will take you up to London and go with you to his solicitors. Mr. Short is such a clever, splendid man. I am sure you couldn't be in better hands!"

After this, Adam was called into the consultation, and Margot could not forbear a secret chuckle as she observed the gusto with which he filled the part of "heavy father."

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She wondered if he would have been quite so kind and fatherly and ready to accompany her to Messrs. Mackieson, Sutton, and Short if she had been plain Maggie Carter instead of the beautiful Lady Stokes. She knew it was odious of her to think thoughts like these, but she could not help it. She did not like Adam any the less because she saw some of her own qualities reflected in him. He was partly good and partly foolish—just like Mary—just like all the world—and really not so very much more of a humbug than anybody else.

On the morning of her departure for London with Adam, Margot took Mrs. Henderson aside and begged as a great favour that she might be allowed to write her a cheque for £100 for the fund that was being raised for the "W.P.L.A.L." It had given her a new interest in life, she said, and she would never cease to be grateful to Mary for having told her about the movement. Mary Henderson positively beamed, and Margot realised that, after the first few tentative prods, she had triumphantly succeeded in touching her friend's heart. Her reputation, in one quarter at least, had been secured. Whatever unpleasant rumours the Stokes family might choose to circulate about Carl Frensen's legacy, they would gain no credence here. . . .

Margot did not go to Charles Street while she was engaged in consultations with Messrs. Mackieson, Sutton, and Short, but instead took rooms for Ernestine and herself in a small hotel in Albemarle Street.

Any illusions she might have entertained as to the "ease" with which divorce proceedings could be started and carried through, were quickly shattered. Vernon did everything that could possibly have been required of him, and quickly put the necessary evidence of "misconduct"

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at her disposal; but, in spite of this, her equivocal position, the constant visits to the offices of Mr. Short, and the endless consultations exasperated her beyond bearing. If it had not been for the tonic of Godfrey Levett's firm advice and his rock-like insistence on what she should do—together with the stimulating excitement of a visit to her Paris inheritance—she felt she would have collapsed under the strain. Mr. Short, for a lawyer, seemed to ramble amazingly from the point. He had a chubby red face very carefully shaved, and talked in a suave, caressing tenor. Margot felt that if she had given him the slightest encouragement he would have patted her hand or offered her a biscuit and a glass of port wine. He enraged her by attempting to "spare her feelings" instead of getting on with the matter in hand. . . .

She saw as much as she could of Godfrey, though her excessive nervousness prevented her from meeting him except in public restaurants or at her hotel. At Christmas she went to her villa at Cap Martin with Vivie Nugent, who was always prepared to be useful if it were really made worth her while (and Cap Martin was worth anyone's while!).

The delights of the Villa des Roses, a lovely house which gleamed white amid the trees on the Monaco side of the wooded promontory, just under the rocks of Roquebrune, ought to have been enough to make the most worried soul contented. But Margot could find no peace yet. She liked men, and the absence of Frensen and of Godfrey, even of Vernon, made her feel lonely and her life seem insipid. She returned to the Avenue Hoche at the end of March, but nervousness restrained her from going to London until it was absolutely necessary. Her case had been postponed until after the Easter recess, when it was the first on the list. Even if everything

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went off well, she could not be free until the beginning of October. The publicity (though, thank Heaven! there were no dreadful letters to be read, nor the evidence of nasty-minded servants to be elicited by gloating counsel) was odious to her. The society papers published her photograph and Vernon's, while the Duchess of Stretton happened not to be looking in her direction when she passed her in New Bond Street. The whole business was agonising! And yet everything was made as easy for her as possible. She was given her decree nisi, and there was nothing in the proceedings except the interest attaching to her husband's name, out of which a newspaper paragraph could be made.

After it was all over, she determined to leave England for France until the six months had expired and she was free. On the day before the one on which she had arranged to start, the need to see Godfrey once more was too much for her, and she wired to ask him to dine with her quietly that evening at her hotel.

Levett had to put off another dinner engagement in order to accept, but while he was dressing, it occurred to him with uncomfortable vividness that there wasn't much that he was not prepared to do for her nowadays—little devil that she was! He didn't know how she had managed to get so out of hand! While he was driving to Albermarle Street he felt a regret, that was almost like physical pain, to think that Margot was going away from London for so long, was going away without once coming to see him in his flat. Always, since her split with Vernon, their meetings had taken place in public—at restaurants, in the Park, at theatres. He had never liked the idea of females entering his flat; it was one of his particular personal fads. But since the time when Margot had first invaded his rooms, on the day they went

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to see the loan collection at the Cork Street Galleries, they had never seemed quite complete without her. He often thought of the contrast which her fair hair had made against his black silk cushions, and after she had gone that day it had seemed as though her ghost had remained behind. Her ghost, shadowy and elusive, had haunted him ever since; nothing would "lay" it, he felt sure, but the presence once again of Margot herself, sitting in the same armchair, with her hat laid on the table . . .

Margot was waiting for him in the lounge when he got to Smith's hotel. He thought she looked pale and very tired, and her clear, china-blue eyes had a strained look as though she were in pain. "I wish it were all over, Godfrey, and I were a free woman," she said as they sat down, in the dull English dining-room, to their exquisitely cooked French dinner. I just couldn't bear it, if anything happened now. I'm going over to Paris, and I shall stay there until I'm out of quarantine. Mary Henderson is coming over for a week to help me with the servants, and I shall enjoy setting up a household of my very own. But I wish it were all over!"

Godfrey laughed at her anxieties. "My dear, there won't be any hitch. The King's Proctor isn't as formidable as all that. Besides, I'm sure you had the ardent sympathy of the court. Nothing could have gone off better."

"Well, anyway, I feel just about dead, I can tell you. I don't believe I could have faced it if I'd known what it would be like. I don't believe it was all worth while. . . ."

"Don't you?" he asked, glancing up at her out of his queer grey eyes. "I wish I could make you think it was, my dear!"

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Margot looked away and did not reply, until the waiter tactfully brought the *filet de sole bonne femme.*

"I do *love* sole cooked with whitebait, don't you?" she said. "It's one of the things they do best here. I think the chef must have come from Ciro's."

Godfrey chuckled at her sophistication and adroitness, but the faint flush which he noticed was enough to save his *amour-propre.* They went on discussing food; and this brought them, by easy stages, to Paris. "Now, I hope you won't decide to live in Paris indefinitely instead of in London. You are much too good for Paris, Margot," said Godfrey, climbing on to one of his tubs. "Paris is the spiritual home of all cheap minds—the paradise of the second-rate. Clothes and cooking and robbing foreigners are the only things in which the Parisians are really supreme. You will get sick to death of the place in a month or two. Wait till you see it when it rains; you will want to commit suicide for sheer misery. Underneath its froth of 'pleasure' it is the gloomiest city in Europe! The only good thing about it is the fact that we first met one another there! London is the place for you, my dear. London is so huge, so alive, so full of changing colour and movement, so subtle and haunting. You will get to the end of Paris soon enough; you will never get to the end of London. Let me keep my eyes open while you are away for a really charming house for you. . . ."

"Bless your heart," said Margot, laughing. "It isn't *where* I live that I care about so much now . . ." She left the rest of her sentence unspoken, smiled, and looked away from him.

They had finished dinner and were sitting in the lounge over their coffee and cigarettes. Both were conscious of an inability to say the things they wanted to say, and a

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feeling of depression invaded them at the same moment. At the next table two fat and richly jewelled women were discussing the iniquities of a third. Their jarring voices made a discordant background to this unsatisfactory parting. Soon after the clock struck ten Godfrey decided that it was no use staying any longer, and got up to go.

"Shall I come over and see you?" he asked, "or do you propose to retire completely from the world for the next six months?"

"No, Godfrey, I don't think you'd better come and see me. I'll let you know as soon as I'm free."

Godfrey wished her a pleasant journey and chaffed her with gentle mockery about her subjection to Mrs. Grundy, while they shook hands with conventional indifference. As it was a fine night he turned into the Park for half an hour before going back to his flat. He was more moved and upset than he cared to acknowledge. He hated the thought that Margot was going away, that he would not see her for six months; and even more than this, he hated their dull and flat farewell.

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CHAPTER XXX

AFTER Margot's departure from London, Levett was annoyed with himself for the feeling of restlessness which came over him. He did not like these symptoms; they had a certain unpleasant familiarity—"What's this dull town to me?" and so on. In order to prevent himself from thinking about her, he made a point of going out more than usual. The season this year was more hectic than ever; the peculiar gay frenzy of rag-time seemed to permeate London life. It was as though the whole world of London society had started dancing and could not stop. It would need something like an earthquake —or the Day of Judgment—to break the spell. Godfrey's last play had brought him in more than all the others put together, and as he had contracted the Night Club habit, he managed to amuse himself almost as much as usual. But all the time he was consciously or unconsciously looking forward to a day, towards the end of October, when Margot would write to him, and he would see her again. Would she keep her promise, and if she did, what should he say to her? The girls—mostly stage beauties, whose kindness to a man who might be able to get them speaking parts knew no limits—with whom he supped and danced at Martin's or The Five Hundred, instead of making him forget Margot, only succeeded in reminding him of her by suggesting comparisons. It was Margot's *virtue,* perhaps, that most attracted him. She did not smoke too many cigarettes or drink, except in extreme moderation; she had a self-control, a restraint in her indulgences, which captivated him. He disliked *abandon* in women, even when the

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excitement of it went to his head and carried him away. Perhaps it was that he was becoming middle-aged and had grown out of it. He did not think he would ever grow out of Margot; and he had never seen a woman's figure that so magnificently bore clothing. The difference between Margot and the other women he met lay largely in the fact that she had character, the others only appetites. He had always been interested in Margot from the moment when he had first met her at the picture shop in the Rue Laffitte with Israel Falkenheim. Since then he had watched her progress "upwards" with continuous amusement and appreciation. He had no illusions about her; her crudity, her selfishness, and the vulgarity of her ambitions did not escape him. But he saw, as well, that there was something strong and valuable in her personality: something gay, determined, and elusive. He loved her pluck, her fiery, undaunted nature. She had the fascination which so often clings to very self-centred people, and her points of view were refreshing in their daring commonsense. He rejoiced in the consideration which she had obtained for herself by hard fighting, and the observation of the various manœuvres by which she had constantly added to this consideration had afforded him many moments of pleasure. There was a simple "everywoman" quality about her that was a delight—beautiful, uncivilised little animal that she was! The more Margot "got on," the more possessions were added unto her, and the more sumptuously she succeeded in clothing herself, the more did his admiration of her increase. His admiration reached its zenith after her final stroke of good fortune—her legacy from Frensen. And then had followed her break with Vernon, which had upset, not only his calculations, but his peace of mind. . . .

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Well, she had pushed up her golden head into the sun; the stony ground on which Fate had choosen to cast her as a child had not prevented her from taking root, growing, blossoming. She wouldn't stop now; her progress would continue uninterrupted, but in what direction would she travel henceforth? What would she do next? This was the question that Godfrey kept putting to himself, as he sat with a bottle of champagne in front of him and Miss Laurel Hope by his side, listening to a nigger band playing rags and fox-trots. He imagined he did not want to marry; such a step had always been contrary to his philosophy. On the other hand, the idea at this juncture of Margot marrying anyone else was insupportable. If only she had not left Vernon, he might never have thought of her like this. It was the *possibility* of his carrying her off that was so maddening, so tempting; the possibility of her refusing him which kept him on tenterhooks.

As the summer wore on, his condition became worse instead of better. Once or twice he was on the point of rushing over to France to see her, if only for an hour. The thought of their unsatisfactory good-bye was bitter, and he found himself wondering whether she had taken away with her a bad impression of him. He could not gather anything from her scrappy notes: she was always an inadequate correspondent.

The thought that he, of all people, was rapidly becoming one of Margot's victims delighted his sense of humour, though the joke was one entirely against himself. Surely he was old enough to know better, at thirty-seven! But it was no good struggling. He would never get the memory of her little tricks of gesture out of his head, nor stifle the recollection of the faint

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perfume which always clung to her, and of her bewildering loveliness.

In the middle of July he had a longer letter from her than usual. She wrote this time from Dinant, where she was staying with the inevitable Nugents. Her letter was full of the war scare which was apparently beginning to disturb even that haunt of gilded peace. As she seemed to fancy there was really some truth in the prevalent rumours, he wrote to reassure her, but at the same time to beg her to come back to England. She replied saying that she would come back to London at the end of October, as soon as she heard that her decree had been made absolute. Meanwhile, he was not to think of going over to Dinant to fetch her; she was not really alarmed, and in any case, even if there *were* a war, she would be safe enough in France and would enjoy the excitement; she was not in the least afraid.

Godfrey shrugged his shoulders when he got this, determined to pull himself together, and went yachting with a plutocratic acquaintance, specially cultivated for this purpose, along the coast of Norway. The Declaration caught him at Molde, a one-horse fishing port brought into prominence by the Kaiser's predilection for it, whence he was unable to move for a week of hectic excitement, confusion, and annoyance. The only gleam of amusement which the situation afforded was its effect on a tiresome member of the party called Nigel Warneford, a middle-aged stockbroker, famous for his innumerable pairs of boots and shoes and for the enormous number of clubs of which he was a member. Poor Nigel, in spite of the fact that the yacht remained all the while close inshore, was almost continuously sea-sick from August 3rd to August 10th inclusive. The re-

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mainder of the guests were gamely nonchalant when they were together, but avoided one another as much as possible, preferring to wrestle in solitude with the agonising task of "trying to realise it." Sir Harry Ashford, who owned the yacht, was the only member of the party who remained comparatively unmoved. He took the *Norma* into Bergen, and there made arrangements as speedily as he could for the safety of his yacht and of his guests. The party decided to go overland to Christiania, and then to cross by the next available liner for Hull.

Levett's first action when he got back to London was to telegraph to Margot at her Hotel at Dinant to see if she were all right. He got no reply, and feeling more alarmed than he cared to admit—indeed, his intense anxiety was a confirmation, if he needed any, of how dear to him Margot had become—he wired again, this time to the Avenue Hoche. After an interminable delay he was at last successful in getting an answer. "Thanks for inquiries. Don't worry. Am quite safe here. Margot."

Now why on earth did she want to stay in Paris? Obstinate little fool that she was! He spent the greater part of the next two days in his club, waiting amid an expectant crowd of men who stood gnawing their moustaches in front of the tape machines. He was ashamed of the number of newspapers he bought; none of them seemed to contain any genuine news. Where were the French? What were they doing? Why had the French Army only just gone to help the Belgians? What had really happened in Lorraine?

At last he could stand it no longer. His man had been called up for military service; he was uncomfortable, anxious, and hard up. If Margot was so obstinate that she would not come back to London and be properly

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looked after, there was nothing for it—he would have to capitulate and go to her. Within forty-eight hours of arriving at this decision, after a tedious and acutely uncomfortable journey, made on the French side in an ancient and insanitary carriage, he found himself in an almost cabless Paris making for Margot's flat.

The familiar city presented an astonishing appearance on the lovely August afternoon of his arrival. There was none of the hectic, frothy excitement which he expected to find; on the contrary, a well-bred calm was noticeable on the faces of the women and old men in the streets. A good many people seemed to be wearing tiny Union Jacks. Sir John French and his staff had been welcomed a day or two before, and the city was still full of enthusiasm for Great Britain, for khaki, and for Tipperary. Some of the streets which were usually most crowded were empty, and the majority of the fashionable shops were closed. Immense iron shutters protected the windows in the Rue de la Paix and elsewhere, which had formerly been so full of colour and richness. A great deal also of the trumpery nonsense which is characteristic of Parisian street commerce in ordinary times was swept away. The boulevards with all the shrubs, chairs, and little tables of the *cafés* hurried indoors reminded Godfrey of a sitting-room in a lodging-house, from which a new tenant has banished the landlady's ornaments, photographs, and odds and ends. A certain bareness and austerity was observable in the city as in its inhabitants; essentials, in both cases, were no longer obscured. As Godfrey drove on, in the dilapidated *fiacre* which he was lucky to have secured, towards the Avenue Hoche, he was struck once more by the dignified bearing of the people in the streets, particularly of the women. He reflected that there must be a kind of *noblesse oblige*

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feeling in peoples as well as in individuals, of ancient lineage and great traditions. After all, this same Paris had seen the Revolution, the Siege of 1870, and the Commune. There wasn't much that could happen to a nation or to a city through which Parisians had not lived.

Godfrey's heart was beating uncomfortably by the time his cab reached the magnificent expanse of the Avenue Hoche. The great road was completely deserted; the shutters were up in nearly every window. Godfrey pictured all kinds of catastrophes that might have happened to Margot. He imagined her starving, perhaps, or left without servants, her affairs in chaos. The horror of the calamity which had befallen civilisation overcame him, broke down all his settled habits of mind, and made him long frankly, fiercely, to hold Margot in his arms and never let her escape, to cling to something stable in the world of illusions which was breaking up all round him. . . .

The lift was not working; the lift-man had been mobilised. The Concierge's wife made her apologies and told him the number of Milday Stokes's *appartement*. Godfrey dismissed the cabman and walked up the broad staircase, carrying his baggage himself, till he came to Margot's door. He was kept waiting what seemed an age, till at last the door was opened by an elderly female servant, with wrinkled face—the cook, no doubt. Yes, Milady Stokes was at home, but she was not receiving. "Monsieur is from England. Ah, is it possible?" Tears came into the woman's eyes as she thought of the dangers to which Godfrey must have exposed himself in his journey from a land which now, for civilians, seemed cut off completely by war. She asked Godfrey to wait in the library while she took in his name.

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Then, in a moment, there was a quick step in the passage; the door was flung open.

"Godfrey! How could you! I *am* glad. How did you manage to get across. . . . ?" Margot looked pale and thin with anxiety and shock, and the sight of Godfrey, in her overwrought condition, made her want to cry weakly with pleasure.

He did not speak in answer to her greeting. He did not know what to say; but his arms enclosed her, and his lips hungrily and tenderly sought hers. She yielded to him, and her body seemed completely to relax as he held her. He had never known her so gentle. "Godfrey," she whispered. "It's over four years since you kissed me. Do you know that. . . . ?"

"Why have you kept me away from you all this time? Little wretch! Why didn't you come back to England when I told you to, before the war?" he said. "Now, you see, I've had to come over to fetch you. I thought the journey would never end. The train went at a snail's pace, bumped, shunted, and was examined by officials every few minutes. You never saw such antique, bug-stricken railway-carriages! I can't think where they dug them up from. Where are the Nugents?"

"Oh, they went back to London just in time."

"Trust them!" said Godfrey. "All the same, why didn't you come too, you disobedient creature? What was the point of staying on here?"

"I don't know. Who knows what is the point of anything a woman does? There probably *was* a point. I just didn't want to come back to London. I thought I'd stay on here, war or no war. After all, I've got two properties in France and none in England. I didn't want to lose all my possessions. What was the use of running away and trusting to luck? As it is, all the really valu-

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able things here and in the Villa des Roses are as safely packed away as it was possible to arrange for. Things haven't really been so bad. The rumours are the worst. To-day we hear that everyone who can is going to leave Paris. I shan't! At first it was rather difficult when we thought England wasn't going to join in. But now everybody is 'content avec l'Angleterre.' No, I'm glad I didn't go back to London. Besides, there was you. You were much too 'up' on yourself, my dear. I thought I'd leave you for a bit till you . . ."

"Till I what?" said Godfrey, with rising colour.

"Come and see the rest of the flat," Margot replied irrelevantly. "Most of the good things are put away. . . . I've only three servants in the place—Ernestine, Louise, and a housemaid."

She took him into the various magnificent rooms of the flat, which had been left in almost exactly the same state as they were when it came into Margot's hands. Only the *salon* had been altered and made less formal. As they entered the room, they both looked at Courbet's portrait of Carl Frensen at the age of twenty-eight, which hung on the wall facing them, framed in black. What a strong, interesting, unscrupulous face it was, and how the dark, red-brown, magnetic eyes seemed to stare out of the picture, looking into their hearts! They were cynical, understanding eyes, but neither to Godfrey nor to Margot did they seem unsympathetic.

Margot sank into a deep *bergère,* putting her hand on the cushion for Godfrey to sit beside her. Then suddenly her head sank down and she covered her face with her hands. The rare tears trickled through her white fingers. Godfrey had never believed her capable of tears. Hard, *gamine,* truculent, ruthless, selfish, amusing, jewel-like in her undimmed brightness—all these things

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he knew her to be. Why was she weeping? She cried quite silently, without any movement of her shoulders.

He put his lips to her gold, fragrant hair, but she did not want to be caressed, and looked up at him with swimming eyes.

"Oh, this war!" she moaned. "Godfrey, I've seen him . . . Vernon! He looked so brown and brave and well, and so handsome. He was in Paris yesterday, with some other English officers. I suppose he rejoined his regiment at once—he was on the reserve. . . . He is certain to be killed; and I shall feel wretched all my life for having made him miserable—just at the end. He hasn't had time yet to console himself with Ida. Poor old Vernon. It's all too awful. . . . And yet . . . I don't really like him any more, although I'm so sorry for the poor dear. It's no use my pretending I do. I suppose I've no heart!"

She dried her eyes and sat back in the chair for a moment without speaking. "I think my nerves must have given away," she said at last. "I have done nothing but cry since this wretched war started. What's the *good* of it—that's what I should like to know? Who wants a war? What is it all about? Nobody is 'patriotic' nowadays, or cares what country he belongs to, so long as it is big and rich and civilised. I tell you, Godfrey, I'm just about fed up with all this patriotism. It's so terribly old-fashioned. If there had been no flag-wagging there wouldn't have been any war. I wish these wretched *boches* could all be stewed in boiling oil, and the Kaiser torn to pieces by wolves. What is the good of living in the twentieth century at all, if the world is going to behave like this! And there's poor Vernon. . . . The only thing he cared for was his looks, and if he isn't

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killed he's certain to be mangled, or blinded, or become a cripple. . . . Of course, it's people of his sort who are responsible for it all; it isn't the lower classes—the class that I spring from—who've done it, Godfrey. *We* aren't guilty. It's the effete aristocrats, who are born with everything they want and haven't got to fight for it, who are the cause of all this misery. War gives them romance, excitement, glory, and all that—something to live for, like a more dangerous kind of sport. It serves to bolster up all your rotten, antiquated traditions of caste. And now 'father's sword' is going to make 'little gentlemen' out of thousands more unfortunate youths who otherwise might be getting ahead and doing something! I'm a modern woman—you are modern too, Godfrey. But Vernon, and his sort, are just an old-fashioned survival. Back numbers! That was why we fell apart. . . . It isn't any good my pretending to be like the other women. I'm not. I'm not one of them: like Vivie Nugent, for example. I bet Vivie will be rushing about London now, in someone else's car, busy doing 'war work'—as pleased as Punch!"

Godfrey laughed at her vehemence. "You are quite right," he said. "Half the idle women in London have gone mad with excitement and are working nineteen hours a day!"

"My sort of person doesn't need war to bring an excitement into life, Godfrey. I get all the excitement *I* need, thank you, in fighting for the things I want. I wasn't born with anything at all. Life itself has been *my* war; and so it is for everyone with anything in them, except these beastly aristocrats. I'd start a revolution to-morrow, Godfrey, if I could. There are millions more poor people than rich in the world, and the poor don't want to fight. Don't tell *me!* It's the rich who trick

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them into it. . . . I'm going to turn the Villa des Roses into a hospital for wounded Tommies: no officers or gentlemen admitted! And you had better buckle to and drive the car, after I've had it converted into an ambulance. I'm not going to have you enlist as a Colonel, my dear, or any rot like that."

Godfrey listened to Margot's outburst with surprise mingled with amusement and appreciation.

"The war has evidently effected a marvellous conversion in you already, Margot!" he said with a smile. "It's quite clear you will never wish to make boss shots at the best people any more, so perhaps you'll reconcile yourself to marrying a social detrimental this time. I'm not sure your conversion didn't start when I persuaded you to throw up that bazaar at the Duchess of Stretton's; do you remember?"

"I wonder why men always begin to grin as soon as a woman talks sense?" remarked Margot irrelevantly. "I suppose it is to show their superiority, or else to conceal the fact that they haven't been clever enough to grasp the point. . . . I dare say it takes something like a war, though, to show one what one really thinks and feels." Her tone changed as she added: "During the last fortnight all kinds of things seem to have become clearer, Godfrey. . . ." She gave him a swift glance out of her shining blue eyes. Her red lips, usually so firmly set in their delicate curves, seemed to tremble now as though they might either break into a smile or droop again with distress. Her bosom rose and fell under the thin black silk of her frock, and to Godfrey she had never before seemed so womanly, and so desirable, and so elusive. She got up from the double armchair and walked across the room to the chimneypiece as though she had all at once become acutely ill at ease. Godfrey

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rose too and went across to where she waited looking down, her head turned away from him.

"Darling," he said, taking her in his arms, "I hope one of the things you see more clearly now is the fact that I adore you. . . ." Margot did not answer. Her face flushed a deep crimson, and, as this was hardly becoming, it was presumably involuntary. "I'm not going ever to let you go again," he went on. "I won't let the wretched war hurt you, my love. Nothing can hurt either of us if we care for each other. I don't suppose you could really care for anyone, though!" he added with a sigh. She looked up angrily at this. Then, with the spontaneity that was always one of her greatest charms, she threw her soft arms round him and buried her face in his coat.

"I shouldn't let you stay here and talk rot if I didn't love you," she said. "And I don't want you to go. . . ."

With the old life breaking up all round them, the old interests, amusements, vices being swept away before the tempest of war, they clung together united in the great simplicity of affection. Of the two of them, Godfrey had changed most. The war had torn from him his outer garments of insincerity and pose, had acted as a tonic for the soul, giving him vigour, courage, energy, hope, and a certain ruthlessness. If the world chose to go mad, he and Margot would keep their heads, and when peace came they would find happiness and zest for life amid the universal chaos! In the glorious days to come a new existence would begin for them both, purged of the old vicious follies and cheap ambitions. This war would open wide the windows, letting out the overheated, foul, vice-laden atmosphere, letting in the clean, fresh winds. Oh, there would come a time when the sun would shine

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as it had never shone before; there would come a spring —after all this misery—when their hearts would exult with joy of living! In this new world his unconquerable Margot would come into her own. She was born for it, a veritable pioneer. And she would take him with her on into the sunshine.

THE END.

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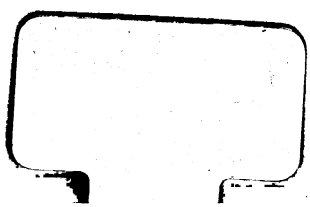

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